

TERTULLIAN'S THEOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS: TOWARDS
IDENTIFYING TERTULLIAN'S PRINCIPLES OF SCRIPTURAL INTERPRETATION

by

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Abstract

This thesis is an attempt to articulate Tertullian's principles of hermeneutics. It gathers relevant statements from across his recognized works, and attempts to synthesize his thought on hermeneutics. What emerges are eight principles that determine his Scriptural interpretation. In the first chapter, Tertullian's treatises are placed in the literary context of classical rhetoric, and an argument is advanced that Tertullian took much influence from the rhetorical tradition, but does not uniformly conform to exact parameters of Ciceronian rhetoric. Rather, Tertullian is an original writer who synthesized classical rhetoric with the literary structures of the Scriptural canon as he saw it. The second chapter explores Tertullian's view of the Scriptures, arguing that he held to a unified canon of writings that he understood to be God's word. The third chapter is the mainstay of this thesis, and argues that many of Tertullian's treatises are best read as a unified theological project. It is argued that many of his writings evince an effort on Tertullian's part to apply hermeneutic principles to an array of theological topics, and thus may profitably be read as a concentrated literary effort in hermeneutics. Lastly, an attempt to state his hermeneutics in eight principles are explained and demonstrated.

ABBREVIATIONS

Ad Martyras	To the Martyrs
Ad Martyras	To the Martyrs
Ad Nationes	To the Nations
Ad Uxorem	To His Wife
Adversus Hermogenem	Against Hermogenes
Adversus Judaeos	Against the Jews
Adversus Marcionem	Against Marcion
Adversus Praxeas	Against Praxaeus
Adversus Valentinianus	Against the Valentinians
Apologeticus Pro Christianus	Apology for the Christians
De Anima	On the Soul
De Baptismo	On Baptism
De Baptismo	On Baptism
De Carne Christi	On the Flesh of Christ
De Corona Militis	On the Soldier's Garland
De Cultu Feminarum	On the apparel of women
De Exhortatione Castitatis	On Exhortation to Chastity
De Fuga in Persecutione	On Flight in Persecution
De Idolatria	On Idolatry
De Jejuniiis, Adversus Psychicos	On Fasting, Against the Materialists
De Monogamia	On Monogamy
De Oratione	On Prayer
De Paenitentia	On Repentance
De Pallio	On the Ascetic Mantle
De Patientia	On Patience
De Prescriptione Haereticorum	The Prescription Against Heresies
De Pudicitia	On Modesty
De Resurrectione Carnis	On the Resurrection of the Flesh
De Spectaculis	On the Shows
De Testimonio Animae	The Soul's Testimony
De Velandis Virginibus	On Veiling Virgins
Scorpiace	Antidote to the Scorpion's Bite

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Introduction

This thesis is a theological investigation of Tertullian's hermeneutics. In an age before the genre of Bible commentaries, Tertullian sits as one of the first Christian writers to make an effort at articulating rules for the interpretation of Scripture. Many of his treatises can be profitably read as an effort to apply the Bible to the theological, cultural, and ecclesiastical issues of his day. This area of Tertullian studies has been recently rediscovered, as some contemporary patristic and New Testament scholars have been surprised at the quality and depth of Tertullian's handling of Scripture.¹ His exegesis of Scripture is one of the dominant areas of scholarship in Tertullian studies still active today.

This thesis claims that Tertullian's (many) statements of a hermeneutical nature evince a system of thought that determines how he reads Scripture. This system of thought is expressed in eight rules, many of which have considerable conceptual overlap. This conceptual overlap can be partly explained by reference to Tertullian's rhetorical background, which plays no small part in his hermeneutics.

The research method used in this thesis is the careful study of the entirety of Tertullian's commonly recognized works as represented in the popular Pre-Nicene Fathers English translations.² Careful attention is given to isolating and collating his clearest statements of hermeneutical principles and to categorize these various statements under suitable headings. These headings are common hermeneutical principles broadly recognizable within the pages of the church Fathers and already established, as such, in the field of patristic studies. The aim of this study is to construct a broad picture of how Tertullian handles the Scriptures. Relevant conversations in secondary sources are consulted, with the most germane scholarly insights being brought to bear on the inquiry into Tertullian's hermeneutics. Relevant conversations and scholarly insights include ongoing efforts to define

¹ Todd D. Sill and David E. Wilhite, ed., *Tertullian and Paul* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2013), xviii.

² *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973).

Tertullian's relationship to classical rhetoric, the plausibility of reading his treatises as a theological whole, and his particular view of the Scriptures.

This project is divided into three chapters. The first chapter introduces Tertullian and his context with a particular focus on understanding his rhetorical background. This chapter primarily discusses the two most commonly assumed streams of influence on Tertullian's hermeneutics: that of rhetoric and the Scriptures. This chapter seeks to clarify and define many aspects of Tertullian's rhetoric with an eye towards how this affects his hermeneutics. A case will be made that many of Tertullian's treatises can be read together as a larger literary project.

The second chapter is an introduction of prerequisite issues that aid in forming a comprehensive view of Tertullian's hermeneutics. Of particular concern is how Tertullian viewed the Scriptures to which he applied his hermeneutics. Crucial to these hermeneutics is the unity and divine authorship of the Scriptures since this plays no small part in the internal coherency of the Scriptures in his many arguments. This chapter places an emphasis on one of Tertullian's central concerns: the relationship of apostolicity to the Scriptures. One notes that the eight rules proposed include rules pertaining to ecclesiastical phenomenon. His concept of canon is briefly discussed as a product of his late second and early third century context which helps to place Tertullian's concept of Scripture in historical context, the concept of canon at that time being different than what the modern reader may assume.

The third chapter is the mainstay of this thesis. It begins with a response to many scholars who view it as implausible to collect a unified view of Tertullian's hermeneutics due to the situational quality of his writings. Evidence of underlying unity between treatises will be presented. A demonstration of various frameworks that numerous scholars have presented for understanding Tertullian's hermeneutics will be discussed, with this thesis adopting its own model. Rather than wholesale adoption of an existing model, this thesis carves out a new set of principles in concert with

some of the existing contributions to this area of study. This is framed as eight “rules,” arranged approximately in order of importance. The first is the rule of reason and nature. By this, Tertullian appeals to a normative law, known to all men³ and founded by God, though distorted by human sinfulness. The rule of faith is second, which is a statement of faith given to the Apostles by Jesus, and a normative standard by which he reads scripture. Next is the rule of progressive revelation, which is a theological rubric by which he understands the nature of God’s ongoing work in history. He uses this rubric extensively in arguments involving how to apply the Scriptures, especially in discerning the contemporary meaning of Old and New Testament texts. Fourth is the rule of discipline, which is an ethical criterion by which to identify which churches have ethical warrant to interpret the scriptures properly. Fifth is the rule of context, which attempts to express the importance of placing a text within its historical context, as well as recognizing the context the reader is in within the broad scope of God’s working in history. Next is the rule of ecclesiastical fellowship, which, like the rule of discipline, is an ecclesiastical tool of narrowing the field of who is allowed to interpret the scriptures. Churches that do not walk in fellowship with established churches are disqualified from having a hearing at the exegetical table, for they do not maintain the unity of the faith with established congregations. Seventh is the rule of tradition, which is a normative yet amendable body of tradition not found in scripture, but practised in churches that maintain communion with other apostolic churches. Lastly there is the rule of grammar and logic, which is a catch-all for Tertullian’s frequent appeals to various linguistic and grammatical principles that he frequently advances to justify his interpretations of scripture.

³ This thesis makes use of traditional masculine pronouns.

This thesis has made use of a digital compilation of Tertullian's works as a primary source for research.⁴ To be clear, this text makes use of the same translations of the Latin found in the most common print version of his works, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* series.⁵ The Delphi Classics edition has the added advantage of including the original Latin. When citations of Tertullian's work depend on precise wording, a comparison with the original Latin was made to ensure that no arguments are contingent on questionable translations. Where applicable, this thesis has also consulted more recent translations of Tertullian's works to be found in the Ancient Christian Writers series, though this series is only a partial collection of Tertullian's writings.⁶ When citing Tertullian, this thesis has adopted the method of citing the Latin title and locations of Tertullian's works, which creates a greater uniformity of formatting, and, thus, ease of reference. This should allow the reader to more precisely locate any citations, as page numbers are no longer useful for a resource so widely available in numerous online and digital formats. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are taken from the Ante-Nicene Fathers series.

The approach to research for this project and the subsequent development of argument contained in this thesis, has been an inductive one. That is, it has sought to make observations about Tertullian's literature first, and to draw conclusions from a collected set of data. The criteria for including relevant data has been a linguistic one: texts containing comments pertaining to hermeneutics in the broadest sense have been selected for analysis and comparison. This has not reduced the method of study to word searches, but has sought to identify texts where the meaning of a section may be applicable to the study of Tertullian's hermeneutics.

⁴ Tertullian, *The Complete Works of Tertullian*, trans. Sydney Thelwall, Peter Holmes, and Robert Ernest Wallis, Delphi Classics, Google Books, 2018, <https://www.delphiclassics.com/shop/tertullian>.

⁵ *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*.

⁶ Tertullian, *Treatises on Marriage and Remarriage: To His Wife, An Exhortation to Chastity, Monogamy*, trans. William P. Le Saint (New York, NY: Newman, 1951); Tertullian: *The Treatise Against Hermogenes*, trans. J. H. Waszink (New York, NY: Paulist, 1956); Tertullian: *Treatises on Penance*, trans. William P. LeSaint (London: Newman, 1959).

Lastly, it should be stated that this thesis takes a historical-critical approach to Tertullian's writings, which reads him as a product of his own historical context; that is, a late second century Latin writer who used the literary tools of the rhetorical schools of his era. This context was one in which the classical tradition was the starting point for the appropriation of the Christian scriptures. Clearly, Tertullian demonstrates his creativity as a rhetor by applying the principles of that tradition to the Christian Scriptures. He is not merely a rhetor as some have described him, but a creative Christian thinker and writer who profoundly affected the trajectory and language of Latin theology.

Chapter 1

Tertullian and Rhetoric: Defining His Rhetorical Influence

Introduction

This chapter will introduce some of the biographical narratives of Tertullian that have affected how he is read and explore the variegated ways the tradition of rhetoric forms the background behind his writings, and, thus, his hermeneutic(s). It will conclude with a review of how Tertullian's rhetoric has been received in the secondary literature, thereby priming the reader for concerns about Tertullian's hermeneutics raised by varying assessments of the role of rhetoric in Tertullian's writings.

A. Biography

One of the features of Tertullian studies is the paucity of biographical information about the man himself. There are only three sources for information about him on which the rest of church history has sketched his biography. The first is Tertullian's own writings, none of which are biographical in character, although certain facts may be gleaned here and there from them. The second source is a brief statement of Jerome's, written in his *Lives of Illustrious Men*;

Tertullian the presbyter is now at last placed first of the Latins after Victor and Apollonius . . . He was a presbyter of the Church up to the middle of his life; later, when he had lapsed into the doctrine of Montanus because of the envy and reproaches of the clergy of the Roman Church he mentions the new prophecy in many books. Moreover he composed volumes specifically against the Church: *On Modesty*, *On Persecution*, *On Fasts*, *On Monogamy*, six books *On Ecstasy* and a seventh which he composed *Against Apollonius*.⁷

⁷ Ronald E. Heine, *The Montanist Oracles and Testimonia*, Patristic monograph series, no. 14 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1989), 155. Italics added.

The last source is Eusebius, where he is briefly introduced as a lawyer: “Tertullian, a famed, distinguished expert on Roman law.”⁸ Eusebius’ claim has been widely accepted by many, albeit this proposal has been challenged in recent years. There is debate whether Eusebius confused Tertullian with Tertullianus, a famous Roman jurist. The two may not be the same person. Notably, T. D. Barnes has established the most significant case against the traditional view of Tertullian as a jurist.⁹ There remain, however, some who still defend it as probable.¹⁰

Primary source support for a legal background to Tertullian is usually drawn from his work *De Praescriptio*, where his central argument for the Rule of Faith has parallels in the *regula* of Roman law.¹¹ Such an overt appeal to the Roman legal system to set rules of engagement is surely good evidence of the man’s legal pedigree, is it not? However, legal analogies are insufficient to make a positive demonstration that Tertullian was a jurist, as legal training was a standard in Roman education at the time. The Roman education curriculum was highly systematized and standardized, and remained relatively unchanged from 90 BC to well past 500 AD.¹² Even elementary education for children included the memorization of a large amount of Roman law.¹³ In addition, the primary emphasis of textbooks for rhetoric was legal training.¹⁴ A good knowledge of Roman law was thus crucial to any respectable rhetorical education. This is, therefore, adequate to account for the legal content in Tertullian’s writings.¹⁵

⁸ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2.2.

⁹ Timothy D. Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (New York: Clarendon, 1971), 22-29.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹¹ Hubertus R. Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 160.

¹² James J. Murphy and Richard A. Katula, *A Synoptic History of Classical Rhetoric*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2003), 135.

¹³ Jo Ann Shelton, *As the Romans Did: A Sourcebook in Roman Social History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1988), 107.

¹⁴ Murphy and Katula, *A Synoptic History of Classical Rhetoric*, 158.

¹⁵ David I. Rankin, “Was Tertullian a Jurist?,” *Studia Patristica* 31 (1997): 335-42.

Furthermore, although Tertullian demonstrates familiarity with Roman law, it is not evident to any outstanding degree. On the contrary, Barnes argues that there are significant gaps in Tertullian's knowledge of Roman law; indeed, there were cases of family law and dealings with Christians in Roman law of relevance to Tertullian's arguments in *Apologeticum* and *Monogamia* that are not mentioned.¹⁶ For an alleged expert jurist, the absence of these cases is peculiar in Tertullian's writings.¹⁷ Barnes explains Eusebius' belief in a legal background on account of the poor Greek translations of Tertullian's work that Eusebius was using, particularly the mistranslation that the *Apologeticum* was addressed to the Roman Senate.¹⁸ In sum, there are good grounds for questioning the traditional Eusebian view of Tertullian as a "[A] famed, distinguished expert on Roman Law."¹⁹

Regarding Jerome's biography of Tertullian as a presbyter, there is a significant problem in that Tertullian identifies himself with the laity, not the priesthood.²⁰ As such, Jerome gives the researcher nothing about Tertullian but a perspective that can be falsified from Tertullian's own writings. There is, however, some debate among patristic scholars whether the title of 'presbyter' can be applied to the laity, as the presbytery may have simply been distinct from the priesthood. Although Tertullian says he is not a priest, that does not necessarily exclude him from being a presbyter as Jerome says. A careful look at Tertullian's use of terms for various ecclesiastical offices is worth exploring further, in order to establish more firmly the clerical status of Tertullian in order to assess the historical claim of Jerome.

Tertullian clearly identifies himself as a member of the laity, and, in fact, contrasts this with priests. "Are not even we laics priests?"²¹ In context, Tertullian here is referring to the universal priesthood of all believers of which all laity are part. In saying "we laics" he identifies himself as

¹⁶ Barnes, *Tertullian*, 27.

¹⁷ Barnes, *Tertullian*, 23-24.

¹⁸ Ibid., 24.

¹⁹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2.2.

²⁰ *Exhort Cast* 7.3; *Monogamia* 12.2.

²¹ Tertullian, *De Exhortatione Castitatis*, 7.3.

unordained laity.²² Tertullian thus clearly self-identifies as ‘laity’ in contrast to a ‘priest,’ but was he actually part of the presbytery? In the same context, merely a few verses later, Tertullian distinguishes presbyters²³ from the laity as well: “[U]nless the laics as well observe the rules which are to guide the choice of presbyters, how will there be any presbyters at all, who are chosen to that office from among the laics?”²⁴ This passage points to Tertullian holding the presbytery to being a distinct class from the laity of which he self-identifies, so he could not have been a presbyter.

In *De Monogamia*, he repeats this argument about presbyters, although he puts more emphasis on the laity conforming to the same marital standards as clergy in general, with emphasis upon the office of bishop.²⁵ One sentence may help shed some light on Tertullian’s use of terms for ecclesiastical office: “From whence is it that the bishops and clergy come?”²⁶ This is a clear instance of Tertullian using the term ‘clergy’²⁷ to indicate a separate class of persons from lay Christians. Given that he has already distinguished the bishop, what other classes of clergy could he be referring to, if not presbyters and priests? The most natural reading of Tertullian, then, excludes the laity from all ecclesiastical offices, with the term *clerus* in his usage referring to priests, presbyters, and bishops. Coupled with his own self-identity as a laic, it is clear that he was not a priest or bishop; also, given his use of terms, it is highly unlikely that he was both a laic and a presbyter. In sum, Tertullian’s explicit identification with laity coupled with his use of clerical terms casts no small doubt on the accuracy of Jerome’s biography.

Attempts to re-construct Tertullian’s life are all highly speculative. As such, it is better to be content with the conclusion of Barnes: “Paucity of evidence renders a full biography of Tertullian

²² Latin *Laicus*.

²³ Latin *Presbyterus*.

²⁴ Tertullian, *De Exhortatione Castitatis*, 7.5.

²⁵ Latin *Episcopus*.

²⁶ Tertullian, *De Monogamia* 12.2.

²⁷ Latin *Clerus*.

impossible.”²⁸ The remaining biography, however, is that he wrote in Latin in the late second, early third century, was a pagan who became a Christian, was married, and lived in Carthage. He evidently received an excellent education in the rhetorical tradition, and was involved in the Montanist schism.

Two important exclusions to the traditional biography have been adopted by this thesis that may indirectly influence his hermeneutics. The first is the attribution of an ecclesiastical office to Tertullian, while the second is his alleged status as a great legal scholar.

Both of these backgrounds are of interest to Tertullian’s hermeneutics. The ecclesiastical background of Tertullian is important as this thesis holds “the Rule of Ecclesiastical fellowship” to be one of his principles of hermeneutics. It is a deeply ironic principle of hermeneutics, since Tertullian eventually fell out of fellowship with the Roman hierarchy and so ends his theological career by being excluded from the community he argued was best fit to rightly interpret the Scriptures. Interestingly, his clearest articulation of this ecclesiastical aspect of his hermeneutics is found in his Montanist works.

Tertullian’s alleged legal background is of some hermeneutical importance in that it is so widely received. Given the paucity of information about him, it is one of the few points of *Sitz im Leben* that readers have. It is unfortunate that his legal background is so well received when whatever legal background Tertullian has pales in comparison to the importance of his background in classical rhetoric. One wonders if Tertullian studies would be better situated if Eusebius had introduced Tertullian as a rhetorician? Surely this would be an aid to future readers who perhaps could thereby better understand the literary phenomenon before them. Eusebius’ original claim had the affect of giving Tertullian some prestige (one notes that Eusebius’ first adjectives for Tertullian are “famed and distinguished...”) in the eyes of his readers, and that seems to be the ongoing effect behind this claim: it gives the reader of Tertullian a sense of the sophistication and high social status of the author. However,

²⁸ Barnes, *Tertullian*, 1.

Tertullian's background is better served by viewing him as theological rhetor, not a lawyer. A legal background merely helps one understand some of the terms in *De Prescriptio*, but a rhetorical background is applicable to all of Tertullian's writings, and so is in need of renewed emphasis over against the traditional received narrative of a churchman and legal scholar.

B. Tertullian and Rhetoric: Defining the Rhetorical Influence

T. D. Barnes points out that the relationship of Tertullian to rhetoric is often ill-defined.²⁹ Despite being ill-defined, it remains a point of consensus among scholars that rhetorical influence runs deep in Tertullian. It is significant that neither an ecclesiastical nor legal background is universally accepted by scholars, but a rhetorical provenance to his writings has no detractors. The influence of rhetoric was not a matter of selective doctrines, as though he chose a principle here and an idea there. Rather, it was a total art of his thinking with deep Ciceronian sympathies.³⁰

1. The Difficulty of Defining Rhetoric

Cicero's works on the topic form the basis for what is known and defined as rhetoric in Roman antiquity. Cicero's *De Inventione* is the primary treatise that outlines Cicero's principles and methods of rhetoric, and was used and commented on well into the late middle ages.³¹ Though regarded by many scholars as an unoriginal work,³² predominantly by virtue of it being an early treatise of Cicero's, and more reflecting the general consensus of rhetoric at the time rather than the idiosyncrasies of Cicero's

²⁹ Barnes, *Tertullian*, 214.

³⁰ Fredouille, Jean-Claude. *Tertullien et la Conversion de la Culture Antique* (Paris, France: Études Augustiniennes, 1972), 178.

³¹ Ibid., 90, 188.

³² Ibid., 90.

mature and original works and letters,³³ it is still regarded as a good picture of what anyone educated in rhetoric was likely given as a curriculum in the course of their education. Indeed, the whole of classical rhetoric often goes by the name Ciceronian rhetoric.³⁴ This is an important work to place beside Tertullian's body of writing, since "the most striking aspect of Tertullian's rhetoric is his conformism or, more precisely, his fidelity and his attachment to classical and Ciceronian techniques and ideals."³⁵

A brief perusal of *De Inventione* raises some difficulties, however, for the modern reader. This work is not so different from a modern textbook on argument and speech-writing, with many common-sense observations about language and reasoning that gives pause to consider whether "rhetoric" is so broad a category that it admits of nothing very peculiar. Is applying the label of "rhetorician" to Tertullian then, simply to say nothing of great specificity? This classic textbook on rhetoric leaves one wondering what exactly this category means as applied to Tertullian, other than that he was a man who wrote with an emphasis on the tools of argument and logic.

Quintillian, another famous rhetor who bequeathed to us a treatise on oratory, admits as much: "Aristotle himself also by his tripartite division of oratory, into forensic, deliberative and demonstrative, practically brought everything into the orator's domain, since there is nothing that may not come up for treatment by one of these three kinds of rhetoric."³⁶ More explicitly regarding rhetoric; "[I]ts material was all and every subject that might come up for treatment."³⁷

Aristotle defines rhetoric as "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion."³⁸ Saying that one is a rhetorician then, is somewhat akin to nowadays saying one has a

³³ Robert Dick Sider, *Ancient Rhetoric and the Art of Tertullian* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press: 1971), 12 fn 2.

³⁴ George A. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and its Christian and Secular Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 89-90.

³⁵ Fredouille, *Tertullien et la Conversion de la Culture Antique*, 171. Translation mine.

³⁶ Quintillian, *Institutes of Oratory*, 2.21.2.

³⁷ Quintillian, *Institutes of Oratory*, 3.1.1.

³⁸ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1.2.1.

degree in “Communications.” The category is just as nebulous now as it was then. “To tell the truth, this distinction did not, in the eyes of the ancients, have the importance that we would be tempted to give it: rhetoric was indeed much more flexible than one might think, when it came to define or label genres.”³⁹ It is little wonder then, why Barnes describes the assessment of rhetorical influence on Tertullian as “ill-defined.”⁴⁰

This exceedingly broad scope of rhetoric should be kept in mind regarding Tertullian. The label of rhetor primarily serves to place Tertullian within the educational canons of his day, when rhetoric was a crucial component of a respectable education. In practical terms, it means Tertullian’s writing will bear similarities to the father of Latin literature, Cicero, with literary polishes that one might find in the best oratorical resources such as Quintillian. This Latin literary craft was just that, the art of speaking and writing well according the literary ideals of one’s era.

2. The Ideal Rhetor

Inconvertibly, there are, indeed, ideals of the era that one can identify to help clarify the opacity of the label, “rhetorician.” It was an art with certain values and qualities that were expected of the ideal rhetor. According to Cicero, the rhetor was an artful and persuasive speaker. He was an intellectually well-rounded man, able to speak winsomely in the primary disciplines of philosophy, law, and history. The Carthaginian follows this ideal nicely: “If Tertullian is a ‘rhetorician’, he also has the culture that Cicero demanded from the speaker, especially in the three essential disciplines of philosophy, law and

³⁹ Fredouille, *Tertullien et la Conversion de la Culture Antique*, 110. Translation mine.

⁴⁰ Barnes, *Tertullian*, 214.

history.”⁴¹ Even if we doubt his status as a famed legal scholar, Tertullian’s references to Roman law have long been a distinguishing mark of his writing.

3. Rhetoric in Tertullian: Literary Structure

Tertullian’s writings bear distinctive influences from the rhetorical writings of Cicero,⁴² Quintilian,⁴³ and Aristotle.⁴⁴ This is not just because he quotes or alludes to these authors directly. More telling is how he follows the modes of argument recommended by these authors in their rhetorical textbooks, and uses the categories of ancient rhetoric to structure his writings as though they were speeches.⁴⁵ Since the structure of many of Tertullian’s treatises often precisely conform to classic speech structures, we will look at this in more detail.

Ancient rhetorical handbooks (like Cicero’s youthful *De Inventione*) divided a speech into certain sections: *exordium*, *narratio*, *partitio* (or *propositio*), *confirmatio*, *reprehensio* and *peroration*. Tertullian...deliberately used the standard forms when composing his *apologeticum*. Nor does that ornate work of art stand alone: a similar analysis can be applied to such apparently unpromising material as the *Scorpiace* -and perhaps to the *De Anima*.⁴⁶

In English, these Latin categories roughly translate as follows: preamble, narrative, partition (or proposition), confirmation (arguments advanced of one’s own position), refutation (arguments advanced of one’s opponent’s arguments) and conclusion. The intention of the *exordium* (preamble) was to render one’s audience favourable and attentive to the speaker. Exordiums fell into five types, depending whether they appealed to the honourable, the remarkable, the humble, the doubtful, or the

⁴¹ Fredouille, *Tertullien et la Conversion de la Culture Antique*, 483.

⁴² Tertullian, *De Anima* 24.3.

⁴³ Barnes, *Tertullian*, 217-218.

⁴⁴ Tertullian, *De Anima* 12.3.

⁴⁵ Robert Dick Sider, “Tertullian, On the Shows,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 29, no. 2 (October 1978): 339-365, 363.

⁴⁶ Barnes, *Tertullian*, 206. Italics added.

obscure.⁴⁷ The narration set forth the case that was to be made, and presented the purpose of the speech, which may be “[T]o attack someone on the other side or make a comparison or amuse the audience.”⁴⁸ The Partition presented either the speaker’s points of agreement with his opponent, or a simple list of the points to be demonstrated.⁴⁹ The Confirmation was the part of the speech where arguments were advanced, which were classified as either probable or necessary.⁵⁰ The Refutation was the part of the speech where the formal argument of the opponent was dismantled, either by denying the premises, showing a *non sequitur*, an invalid form, or by simply setting a better argument against one’s opponent.⁵¹ Lastly, the conclusion did three things: ‘rounded off’ the argument or ‘summed things up,’ raised ire against one’s opponent, and/or incited pity for the speaker.⁵²

Classical rhetoric also sought to find rubrics whereby speeches and treatises may be definitively categorized. There is a history to this discussion whereby various rhetors from the socratics through to Quintillian sought to define what kind of speech belongs in what category, and these categorical debates were never fully resolved.⁵³ The lists need not be detailed here, as Tertullian’s work does not conform precisely to these categories. It is sufficient for this thesis to observe that Tertullian played with these structures to a greater or lesser degree of conformity. Barnes captures this literary flexibility well: “Tertullian transcended the limitations of normal genres. He took some elements appropriate to a *consolatio*, and others belonging to exhortation, combined them with several motifs from the philosophical diatribe-and wrote something new and Christian. Precise analysis is difficult, since the

⁴⁷ Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric*, 93.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 93.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 93.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 94.

⁵¹ Ibid., 94.

⁵² Ibid., 94.

⁵³ Barnes, *Tertullian*, 225.

historical development of the pagan literary forms remains obscure.”⁵⁴ Sider summarizes much of the rhetorical influence on Tertullian’s hermeneutics thusly:

[T]hree important features do distinguish Tertullian’s exegetical methods. First, he uses familiar techniques with a nicely-finished, systematic, and persistent application quite novel in Christian literature, which indicates a skill acquired from beyond the Christian tradition. Secondly, he employs his methods with a suggestive deliberation constantly pointing the reader in a highly stylized manner and in the very language of the rhetorical textbooks, to his procedure...Finally, the fact that such methods as contextual and literary analysis are found as an integral part of certain expository passages neatly elaborated by a transparently rhetorical programme of topics stoutly supports the view which sees classical rhetoric as a major source for the essential patterns of Tertullian’s Biblical exegesis.⁵⁵

But what are we to make of the treatises that do not follow classical speech patterns? Compiling a coherent picture of Tertullian’s appropriation of the classical tradition can be a puzzling endeavour due to frequent departure from the canons of rhetoric. But even this may reflect of the depth of Tertullian’s appropriation of the rhetorical tradition. It should be noted that in his later rhetorical works, Cicero emphasized the inadequacy of rules and stressed that rhetoric was an ‘art.’⁵⁶

Some works, like the *Apologeticus*, follow rhetorical canons very closely. Others, such as *De Monogamia*, fully merit the criticism of simple biting polemics.⁵⁷ Sider gives a good general summary of Tertullian’s relationship to rhetorical structures: “[I]n the disposition of his material Tertullian moves well beyond the imitation of rhetorical rules to an imaginative correlation of form and content.”⁵⁸ If one looks for exact imitation, the rhetorical background can be difficult to see. If, however, rhetoric is regarded as an ‘art of thinking adapted to particular purposes,’ the gist is unmistakable. “It is clear, then, that a single set of structural principles may not, perhaps be uniformly applied to all the treatises. Yet we have found that the rhetorical categories are especially illuminating when applied to the major

⁵⁴ Barnes, *Tertullian*, 226.

⁵⁵ Sider, *Ancient Rhetoric and the Art of Tertullian*, 100.

⁵⁶ George A. Kennedy, *A New History of Classical Rhetoric*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 45.

⁵⁷ Fredouille, *Tertullien et la Conversion de la Culture Antique*, 128. Translation mine.

⁵⁸ Sider, *Ancient Rhetoric and the Art of Tertullian*, 21.

polemical treatises, while the neat formalism of others, at times perhaps sophistic, suggests rhetorical influence of a more stylistic kind.”⁵⁹

Sider observes that Tertullian lays out his arguments along both rhetorical structures, and the structure of the Biblical Canon. Tertullian often treats the Gospels as *confirmatio*, (the confirmation of one’s arguments) and the epistles as *refutatio* (The refutation of opposing arguments).⁶⁰ Tertullian does not do this across all of his works, but this pattern is most clearly seen in *De Resurrectione* and *De Monogamia*. “the different sequences expected by classical rhetorical theory and the Biblical Canon are made to coincide.”⁶¹ Tertullian’s five books against Marcion are also arranged according to the sequence of the Biblical Canon. “[T]he first book tackles Marcion’s philosophical arguments, the second demonstrates the identity of the Creator and Marcion’s Good God, the father of Jesus, the third disproves Marcion’s Christology, the fourth examines his Gospel, the fifth his version of the Pauline epistles.”⁶² Claude Rambaux has observed that the literary structure of *De Monogamia* chapters 4-13 is basically a chronological treatment of the Bible.⁶³ It is an open question whether this was a creative arrangement on Tertullian’s part, or whether he genuinely saw the structure of the Scriptures as arranged according to a classical speech.

A further question may be raised as follows: to what extent are Tertullian’s treatises as a whole structured, if at all? The question arises because Tertullian states at the end of his treatise *De Prescriptio* that this work in particular functions as a kind of prolegomena for subsequent treatises he intended to write: “On the present occasion, indeed, our treatise has rather taken up the general position against heresies, (showing that they must) all be refuted on definite, equitable, and necessary rules,

⁵⁹ Ibid., 40.

⁶⁰ Sider, *Ancient Rhetoric and the Art of Tertullian*, 31.

⁶¹ Sider, *Ancient Rhetoric and the Art of Tertullian*, 31.

⁶² Barnes, *Tertullian*, 127.

⁶³ Claude Rambaux, “La composition et l’exegese dans les deux lettres Ad uxorem, le De exhortatione -castitatis et le De monogamia,” *Revue d’Etudes Augustiniennes Et Patristiques* 23, no. 1-2 (1977): 19, fn. 255.

without any comparison with the Scriptures. For the rest, if God in His grace permit, we shall prepare answers to certain of these heresies in separate treatises.”⁶⁴ It should be noted immediately that this breaks with the kinds of conclusions permitted by strict Ciceronian rhetoric in *De Inventione*, which states that conclusions should be a summary, or an incitement of indignation against one’s opponent, or an appeal to pity.⁶⁵ Tertullian does none of these, but concludes with a warning of judgment and the above cited “more to follow.”⁶⁶ Tertullian here breaks with standard rhetorical practice and instead opts to let this treatise stand as an introduction of principles to other treatises. These treatises that are to follow are specific applications of the “definite, equitable, and necessary rules” that Tertullian outlined and for which he argued. It may be fairly asked which treatises specifically are designed to follow from these principles?

Jean Daniélou proposes certain treatises that are well suited to Tertullian’s stated purpose, and how these treatises conform to topics familiar to contemporary theologians. The author asserts:

Tertullian’s works form a kind of Summa which deals in succession with the various aspects of his faith. In the *De testimonio animae* and the *De praescriptionibus*, for example, Tertullian considers the problem of the sources of faith. In the *Adversus Hermogenem* and the *Adversus Marcionem* he treats of the relationship between God and the world. The *De anima* is a study of man. The *De Carne Christi* is concerned with the incarnation of Christ, the *Adversus Praxeum* with the Trinity and the *De Resurrectione Carnis* with Christian eschatology. Taking these works as a whole, we can see that Tertullian’s intention was to provide an exposition of the whole of Christian faith by contrasting it with the various deformations of that faith and by taking advantage of this contrast to throw light on points which were not sufficiently clear.⁶⁷

The idea that Tertullian’s works form a kind of a “Summa” is worth considering in more detail, as this may suggest how Tertullian’s writings are structured across his treatises. But how far can the idea

⁶⁴ Tertullian, *De Prescriptio*, 44.13.

⁶⁵ Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and its Christian and Secular Tradition*, 93.

⁶⁶ One notes that this is a far cry from Cicero’s counsel to “let the whole thing be summed up, and summed up so that nothing be introduced subsequently besides the conclusion.” Cicero, *De Inventione*, 1.33.

⁶⁷ Jean Daniélou, *A History of Early Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicea*. Vol. 3. *The Origins of Latin Christianity*, trans. by David Smith and John Austin Baker (Philadelphia PA, Westminster, 1977), 343-344. Italics added.

of the medieval Summa be fairly applied to Tertullian? There are elements of continuity and discontinuity here, as well as entirely novel elements inappropriate to the genre. The points of continuity are as Daniélou enumerates above, in that the overall topics conform nicely to what would later become the primary loci⁶⁸ of systematic theology. To suggest that Tertullian's works can be seen as a 'Summa' is not to say that he had the entirety of the categories of medieval theology and dialectic methods precisely in mind. The largest discrepancy is of course a historical one: medieval dialectic overshadowed Latin rhetoric from around 700 until the Renaissance,⁶⁹ though the rhetorical tradition began to be revived by, of all people, Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas in the 1300's.⁷⁰ Coincidentally enough, this was in Aquinas' famed *Summa*, albeit for ethical purposes rather than structural and methodical.⁷¹

It would be claiming too little, however, to state that Tertullian had nothing of the sort in mind, as he explicitly states that he had in mind to lay out 'principles of arguments' and to 'apply these to theological topics.'⁷² It is, therefore, fitting that some of his earliest works, *De Testimonio Animae* and *De Prescriptio*, lay out foundational principles of reasoning; which is roughly analogous to a Prolegomena. *De Carne Christi* and *De Resurrectione Carnis* are likely candidates for works which were to follow *De Prescriptio*. It will be shown later that, in spite of its polemical title, *Ad Marcion* also bears distinct evidence of a systematic approach to writing theology.

It may be more than a happy coincidence that many of these treatises can be arranged along the traditional topics of modern systematic theology. The alignment is not entirely complete, as there are treatises that fall outside of this arrangement. Nonetheless, there is enough of a stated intention in *De*

⁶⁸ A locality; a place or topic.

⁶⁹ Kennedy, *A New History of Classical Rhetoric*, 274.

⁷⁰ Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and its Christian and Secular Tradition*, 190.

⁷¹ Ibid., 190.

⁷² Tertullian, *De Prescriptio*, 44.13.

Prescriptio, and enough of treatises along those lines to suggest that the categories that were to emerge later in systematic theologies can be seen in embryonic form in many of Tertullian's treatises.

A modest point of corroboration can perhaps be gleaned from Barnes' chronological ordering of Tertullian's works. Daniélou's proposal is loosely reflected in the chronological order in which Tertullian wrote the relevant treatises. Dating the order of Tertullian's works is a difficult affair, and the following table is Barnes' ordering, offered with modest probability. NB: works of relevance to Daniélou's proposal are in bold. ⁷³

Date	Work
196 or early 197	<i>De Spectaculis</i> <i>De Idolatria</i> <i>De Cultu Feminarum II</i>
Summer 197	<i>Ad Nationes</i> <i>Adversus Judaeos</i>
Summer/Autumn 197	<i>Ad Martyras</i>
Autumn 197 or later	<i>Apologeticum</i>
198	<i>De Testimonio Animae</i>
? Between 198 and 203	<i>De Baptismo</i> <i>De Oratione</i> <i>De Paenitentia</i> <i>De Patientia</i> <i>Ad Uxorem</i>
203	<i>De Praescriptione Haereticorum</i>
Late 203/early 204	<i>Scorpiace</i>
204/5	<i>Adversus Hermogenem</i>
205	<i>De Pallio</i>
? 205/6	<i>De Cultu Feminarum I</i>
206	<i>De Carne Christi</i>
206/7	<i>Adversus Valentinianos</i> <i>De Anima</i>

⁷³ Barnes, *Tertullian*, 55.

Between April 207 and April 208	<i>De Resurrectione Mortuorum</i>
Early 208	<i>Adversus Marcionem</i>
208/9	<i>De Corona Militis</i>
	<i>De Exhortatione Castitatis</i>
	<i>De Fuga in Persecutione</i>
	<i>De Virginibus Velandis</i>
210/11	<i>Adversus Praxean</i>
	<i>De Monogamia</i>
	<i>De Jejunio</i>
	<i>De Pudicitia</i>
c. September 212	<i>Ad Scapulam</i>

With the exception of *De Testimonio Animae*, all of the relevant treatises are written subsequent to Tertullian's alleged prolegomena, of his supposed Summa, *De Praescriptio*. It appears that his writing career began with an external and apologetic thrust which turned into more focused theological issues after he wrote *De Praescriptio*. If one imagines a planned literary effort, interrupted by writing treatises on pressing practical issues, the chronology is not out of step with an ordered effort to write theology. The point is minor, but minor though it be, it is worth noting. It is certainly an interesting and relevant one given Daniélou's proposal.

Daniélou's proposal is not a suggestion of great technicality, but suggests to us how Tertullian's writings may be viewed as a systematic literary effort through the means of separate treatises. Continuities aside, Tertullian's alleged "Summa," and the suggestion of a "systematic" ordering of his treatises is of course best placed within his own literary context of rhetoric. Tertullian wrote separate treatises, but there is evidence for a larger theological project underlying them. This means Tertullian's treatises are best read together, and not in isolation.

A comparison can perhaps be made with the work of Cicero. Would it be a careless anachronism to regard Cicero as a political theorist? Cicero wrote disparate treatises, and in varying styles, with

arguments suited for the immediate topic of the treatise. In addition, some of his works, *De Republic*, *De Legibus*, and *De Natura Deorum* are best read together as an extended argument for Cicero's vision of the ideal state. *De Inventione*, *De Oratore* and *Brutus* are essential treatises on oratory. They are treatises which refer to one another, and chronologically build on one another. They are not formal 'Summa' of political philosophy or rhetoric respectively, but nevertheless form a sustained literary effort to think about the moral and legal foundations of the Roman state and the practice of oratory. Within these works, there is an explicit system of thinking, with principles and assumptions that Cicero continually returns to, and stated in the format of speeches and dialogues with interlocutors. They can be read together profitably, and, when done so, give a much fuller picture of the individual's thought. Tertullian engaged in a similar project with theology. Though the analogy is not a perfect fit with Tertullian, it remains close enough to make the point that there is an overall consistency and coherence that makes it possible to understand them as a totality.

Also similar to Tertullian is Cicero's academic heritage of being criticized for paradox, inconsistencies, and rhetorical opportunism.⁷⁴ Just as Cicero can be accused of shifting the sands of argument in favour of his point at the moment, his overall view of politics is fairly easy to discern, even in many of its particulars. Tertullian is in the same situation, where his paradoxical use of argument and rhetoric from one treatise to another should not obfuscate his principled attempt at doing theology.

In summary, therefore, we may say that Tertullian's appropriation of rhetorical tools to structure his writings is variegated. Sometimes he demonstrates strict conformity, sometimes breaking well-established rules, and at times making something new and Christian by combining rhetorical structures with the structure of the Biblical canon. His treatises, for the most part, function in isolation and can be profitably read as such, but they are still not altogether unrelated to one another. Tertullian broke with

⁷⁴ Marcia L. Colish, *The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden, NL: E. J. Brill, 1985), 65.

rhetorical rules on exactly this point, using *De Prescriptio* in particular as a treatise of principles meant to be applied to other theological topics. While precise ordering may forever remain a mystery, several of his treatises are likely candidates to be seen as an effort to apply a set of rules to *loci* that would later emerge as the traditional *loci* of systematic theology.

4. Rhetoric in Tertullian: Argument Structure and Audience Tailoring

Closely related to the literary structure of his writings is the rhetorical influence of his argument structure and style. While Tertullian did not conform every treatise to a precise categorization of speech, he did follow the canons of argumentation very closely in many of his treatises. This is summarized well by Robert Sider, who is worth quoting at length here:

We may . . . summarize the results of our investigation of the relation between Tertullian's methods of Biblical exegesis and the textbook rules for controversies over written documents. We have found that Tertullian has employed (1) appeal to the context; (2) careful verbal and grammatical analysis; (3) appeal to the honourable and expedient especially to show the serious consequences for morality and religion if the opponents' interpretation is accepted; (4) such conjectural modes of argument as consideration of (a) character and life of the author and (b) time and circumstances; (5) in a minor way certain other topics, or variations of them, such as 'the importance of the subject demands a literal interpretation'. In the passages analysed Tertullian has followed the rhetorical rules almost programmatically.⁷⁵

Sider's list of Tertullian's methods of exegesis gives a good summary of the kinds of rhetorical leanings that influence his hermeneutics. Rhetoric is not merely about the use of arguments, but how these arguments are structured to persuade. In rhetoric, syllogisms "are used with a deliberate sharpness of outline which indicates his conscious effort to achieve rhetorical effect by shaping arguments into

⁷⁵ Sider, *Ancient Rhetoric and the Art of Tertullian*, 96-97.

the pattern of the formal topics.”⁷⁶ The main effect Tertullian is aiming for is a literary crescendo that adds forcefulness and persuasiveness to his various treatises.

This rhetorical structuring of arguments is also seen in the kind of arguments that Tertullian advances. He appeals to more classical sources and general principles in works like *De Apologeticus*, where he is addressing a non-Christian audience. He bases his proofs much more in the scriptures in *Adversus Judaeos*. His arguments are also much more exegetical in such circumstantial topics as *De Corona Militis*, and *De Jejuniis*, where he is engaging with in-house arguments between Christians. He is at his most metaphysical in *De Anima*, where it reads like a philosophical treatise more so than his customary railing against heretics in *Adversus Hermogenem*, *Adversus Marcionem*, and *Adversus Valentinianus*. This reflects the rhetorical emphasis of tailoring arguments to one’s audience.⁷⁷

This diversity of argumentative strategy is important to note, because Tertullian has been accused of shifting his attitude towards Scripture across his treatises and embracing a skepticism that deprives the Scripture of its primacy: “He shows a certain skepticism in his controversial works, a skepticism which tends to deprive the Scripture of its primacy. A very different attitude is found in his catechetical works.”⁷⁸ If O’ Malley is correct, it would be very difficult to pursue the project of compiling a coherent picture of Tertullian’s hermeneutics. It would, in fact, hardly be credible to suggest that he held firm principles about how to read Scriptures which only held primacy as his opinion of them rose or fell at a skeptical whim.

Contrary to O’ Malley’s claim of skepticism above, however, it is much more probable that a shifting emphasis on the Scriptures is a product of the rhetorical method of tailoring one’s arguments to their specific audience. To say it different, it is a stronger (more persuasive) argument to point to a

⁷⁶ Sider, *Ancient Rhetoric and the Art of Tertullian*, 114.

⁷⁷ Colish, *The Stoic Tradition From Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, 87.

⁷⁸ T. P. O’ Malley, *Tertullian and the Bible* (Nijmegen, NL: Dekker & Van de Vegt, 1967), 134.

rhetorical background, which taught Tertullian that “[N]o single kind of style can be adapted to every cause, or every audience, or every person, or every occasion...it is of consequence also to consider who form the audience...we adopt a character of style, fuller, plainer, or middling, suited to the subject on which we are to speak.”⁷⁹ His rhetorical education would have taught him that different kinds of arguments appeal to different classes of people depending on their status in society and their overall background.⁸⁰ The good orator conforms his arguments to the ethos of his audience, and this is adequate to account for varying dependence on the Scriptures for his arguments. Rhetoric thus helps to understand the diversity in argument in Tertullian’s treatises.

This understanding of rhetoric then, goes a long way to understanding Tertullian’s treatises as a whole. Though, admittedly, the treatises do vary in argumentative strategy, style, structure, and tone, it does not follow that taking a different argumentative approach to a topic results in inconsistencies of substance. It may simply mean that one’s audience is different and that one is operating out of different plausibility structures. To conclude, whether to Jews, pagans, or psychics, Tertullian’s treatises, broadly speaking, argue for the truth of the Christian faith, yet with emphases suitable to his audience.

To restate, this thesis argues that Tertullian adapted his rhetorical training to the goal of persuading his audience of the truth of the Christian faith (in the case of his apologetic works) or for the doctrinal issues he regarded as purer expressions of the Christian faith. His varying arguments should not be seen, therefore, as skepticism or inconsistency (though there, indeed, may be that), but rather as a synthesis of the concerns of rhetoric and the concerns of his faith. Modern classicists such as Robert Kennedy see classical rhetoric and the Scriptures as having many overlapping qualities and

⁷⁹ Cicero, *De Oratore* 3.55. The Complete works of Cicero, Delphi Classics, Google Books, 2014. <https://www.delphiclassics.com/shop/cicero/>

⁸⁰ Colish, *The Stoic Tradition From Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, 87.

concerns. The concern to preach the word of God has much overlap with classical rhetoric's emphasis on the spoken word to persuade an audience,⁸¹ and this overlap finds a good archetype in Tertullian.

5. Rhetoric in Tertullian: The *Exempla*

Another specific rhetorical technique, the *exempla*, is worth mentioning, as it bears important imprint on Tertullian's exegesis. While Tertullian never so much says "I am using an *exempla* now," he does frequently make use of biblical character's lives and practices as normative with these often forming a core of his arguments. For Tertullian, Christ is the ultimate exemplar. He states this in very strong terms: "But facts will satisfy me instead of words. Withdraw all the sayings of Christ, His acts shall speak."⁸² To the rhetor, there is a forcefulness to arguments based on *exempla* of which the modern reader needs to be aware. Cicero describes this as follows: "Example is that which confirms or invalidates a case by some authority, or by what has happened to some man, or under special circumstances. Instances of these things, and descriptions of them, will be given amid the precepts for oratory."⁸³ Sometimes, Tertullian is criticized for his selective use of Scripture, where it may be the case that he is just applying the principles of the *exempla* to his exegesis.

For example, Candida Moss criticizes Tertullian's use of Paul's life as a martyrological exemplar. For Moss, this was an abuse of the Scriptural text for Tertullian's purposes: "In many ways the appeal to Paul as martyrological exemplar is an expedient rhetorical move designed to undermine Paul's own writings."⁸⁴ In the eyes of classical rhetoric, the particulars of Paul's life serve as a powerful example of a practice Tertullian wishes his readers to imitate. In light of Tertullian's rhetorical

⁸¹ Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and its Christian and Secular Tradition*. 120-132.

⁸² Tertullian, *Adv. Marcionem*, 4.7.6.

⁸³ Cicero, *De Inventione*, 1.49.

⁸⁴ Moss, "The Justification of the Martyrs," in *Tertullian and Paul*, 113.

background, Moss' criticism is one that does not give adequate credit to the canons of Latin rhetoric. It may, therefore, be argued that Tertullian read Paul as 'any good orator' would likely read him, with a carefully crafted synthesis of his life and doctrine as a unified argument.

The *exempla* is a model example of Tertullian appropriating a technique of rhetorical argumentation and, especially, his application of it to Scripture. Barnes puts this rhetorical influence on Tertullian's hermeneutics well: "His debts to his classical education are many and great. Without a thorough training in ancient rhetoric one may doubt whether he would have learned how to employ *exempla*, both pagan and Christian."⁸⁵

6. Rhetoric in Tertullian: Brevity.

Another example of Tertullian's synthesis of the rhetorical tradition and the Scriptures is his emphasis on brevity. Cicero and Quintilian emphasize the importance of being concise enough for the subject matter at hand, and no more. Brevity is a dominant motif and frequently explicated topic of the great rhetors. Tertullian's style reflects this emphasis, as his writings are generally devoid of speculation, and conforms to the canons of brevity elucidated by Cicero, Aristotle, and Quintilian. For Tertullian's part, he explicitly appeals to the principle of brevity, but defends this principle from Scripture rather than an academic tradition: "To the Christian, but few words are necessary for the clear understanding of the whole subject...for 'endless questions' the apostle forbids."⁸⁶ For Tertullian, the appeal of brevity is found within apostolic authority, and no appeal to the authority of Cicero is needed to justify it. This is a good example of a synthesis with the classical tradition. No overt appeal to classical authors is made, but, rather, apostolic authority is claimed as the source. Nevertheless, it is

⁸⁵ Barnes, *Tertullian*, 213-214.

⁸⁶ Tertullian, *De Anima*, 2.7.

difficult not to see the shadow of Cicero behind this statement, for Paul's emphasis on this point is minor, but Cicero's is well known.

7. Rhetoric in Tertullian: Re-casting Aphorisms

One last example of Tertullian's appropriation of rhetoric is taking famous aphorisms and re-casting them along Scriptural themes.⁸⁷ For example, He takes a famous quotation from Cicero's work, *De Officiis*; "Yield, ye arms, to the toga; to civic praises, ye laurels."⁸⁸ and recasts it for his argument: "Let curiosity yield to faith, let fame give place to salvation."⁸⁹ Tertullian does the same with Juvenal.⁹⁰ These parodies reveal a mind steeped in classical literature, with a desire to re-cast it in Christian terms. In brief, they may be held as further examples of Tertullian conforming his rhetoric and persuasive style to the audience at hand.

C. Tertullian, Rhetoric, and Sophistry

A special problem arises in distinguishing rhetoric from sophistry, and this is because Tertullian is often cast as a polemicist whose writings are pure sophistry.⁹¹ However, it is not always clear whether the term "sophist" is used in a technical sense or a pejorative sense. Moreover, Philostratus bequeathed to posterity a conception of sophism that could be an important description of Tertullian's style of writing, and thus further refine our understanding of the influence of rhetoric on Tertullian.

The term sophist had several meanings over the years, including being a synonym for a public teacher. A sophist was initially a professional educator who instructed young men in making public

⁸⁷ Clare K. Rothschild, "Christ the Foolish Judge in T's On the Prescription of Heretics," in *Tertullian and Paul*, 42.

⁸⁸ Cicero, *De Officiis*, 1.77.

⁸⁹ Tertullian, *De Prescriptio*, 14.5.

⁹⁰ Juvenal, *The Satires*, 3.230, cf. *Adv. Marcion*, 4.24.9.

⁹¹ Barnes, *Tertullian*, 183; Claude Rambaix, "La composition et l'exegese dans les deux lettres Ad uxorem, le De exhortatione -castitatis et le De monogamia," 46

displays of eloquence for fees.⁹² Sophism gradually became a term used for those who studied and practiced rhetoric.⁹³ By Tertullian's day, a clear pejorative meaning had become associated with that profession, with Tertullian himself accusing Marcion of casting sophistical arguments.⁹⁴

In addition to this, Tertullian described Paul's encounter with the "huckstering wiseacres and talkers" of Athens to have been an encounter with "the sophistical doctrines of men."⁹⁵ The pejorative meaning seems to have emerged because sophists were well-known for making public displays by arguing for both sides of the same topic.⁹⁶ For this, they were excoriated most famously by both Plato⁹⁷ and Aristotle.⁹⁸ Due to the triumph of Aristotle and Plato in the history of philosophy, few extant works of genuine sophists have been preserved.⁹⁹

If the meaning of 'sophist' is understood to be a class of rhetorical teachers, then, in this definition, it is unlikely that Tertullian was ever one in any formal sense of the term. Incontrovertibly, it is difficult to conceive of him as a teacher of rhetoric when he explicitly repudiates many aspects of classical education and explicitly states that Christians are forbidden from teaching it.¹⁰⁰ These strong opinions against the educational structures of his day are not exclusive to Tertullian alone, though, as elementary educators find themselves on the list of prohibited professions of Hippolytus' *The Apostolic Tradition*.¹⁰¹ One also notes that this work (deemed of North African origin) is often cited as being of

⁹² W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Sophists* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 35.

⁹³ Murphy and Katula, *A Synoptic History of Classical Rhetoric*, 24.

⁹⁴ Tertullian, Ag. Marcion 4.12.

⁹⁵ Tertullian, *A Treatise on the Soul*. 3.2

⁹⁶ Guthrie, *The Sophists*, 47.

⁹⁷ Plato, *Gorgias*, 458d - 466c. *The Complete Works of Plato*, Delphi Classics, Google Books, 2015.

<https://www.delphiclassics.com/shop/plato/>

⁹⁸ Guthrie, *The Sophists*, 52.

⁹⁹ Guthrie, *The Sophists*, 52.

¹⁰⁰ Tertullian, *De Idolatria*, 10.4-5.

¹⁰¹ Hippolytus, *The Apostolic Tradition*, 2.12-13. The Hippolytan authorship of this document is contested, but the provenance is not.

the same time period as Tertullian. This over-arching bias against pagan learning, combined with Tertullian's scrupulous advocacy of separation from pagan culture makes it unlikely he was a sophist.

A more honorable definition of the sophist is given to us by one of Tertullian's contemporaries, Philostratus.¹⁰² In his usage, the sophist was one who fused rhetoric and philosophy as Cicero did. "Philostratus was celebrating the marriage of philosophy and rhetoric in his *Lives of the Sophists*, and defined the sophist's art as philosophical rhetoric. Gorgias and Hippias had finally triumphed over Socrates and Plato."¹⁰³ This label of sophist could be reasonably attributed to Tertullian, with an eye towards describing his style of writing in comparison to some of his contemporaries. If we substitute "theology" for "philosophy," the following observation of Cicero could well apply to Tertullian: "In addition to using philosophical principles in his rhetoric and rhetorical strategies in his philosophical works, Cicero reoriented the treatment of these two disciplines by observing that philosophy and rhetoric have a common subject matter which can be treated by a common methodology."¹⁰⁴ Cicero's contribution to rhetoric was in uniting philosophical speculation with rhetorical practice, and this is the non-pejorative meaning of "sophist."

Cicero's synthesis of rhetoric and philosophy results in literature that is distinct from philosophy. One of the key qualities of this synthesis is that philosophy lost its abstract qualities, and this is also a distinct mark of Tertullian as a theologian. "Tertullian's normal inclinations: he applied the techniques of rhetoric to specific issues and avoided metaphysical speculation."¹⁰⁵ Further, the goal of a treatise was not to explore or define a topic as in philosophy, as the sophist was not concerned with abstract definitions, but in persuading his hearers. To this end, treatises are always tailored to a

¹⁰² Philostratus was Greek sophist who lived c.170-250 AD.

¹⁰³ Barnes, *Tertullian*, 213.

¹⁰⁴ Colish, *The Stoic Tradition From Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, 72.

¹⁰⁵ Barnes, *Tertullian*, 128.

particular audience, which meant that the methods of argument were fluid according to one's hearers. Colish explains: "In addressing a cultivated audience he may flatter their conception of themselves by appealing to the higher values. Uneducated audiences, on the other hand, can best be moved by an appeal to profit or pleasure..."¹⁰⁶

Sophism then, is an aspect of Tertullian's writing in multiple senses. As mentioned above, he is frequently cast as a sophist, without clearly identifying whether this is an appeal to his Ciceronian literary roots, or just a pejorative title to draw attention to the worst aspects of his literary habits.¹⁰⁷ Broadly speaking, his writings reflect all of the above in different places, though he was never a pure sophist in the sense which Plato decried as a writer of speeches which argue for contradictory positions for amusement's sake, nor is it likely he was a sophist in the sense of a teacher of rhetoric in the classical tradition. Sophism bears a close relationship to rhetoric, as the sophist was trained in rhetoric, and Tertullian certainly was a sophist in this sense at least. Philostratus' cast of the sophist is also appropriately applied to Tertullian as a philosophical rhetorician, insofar as this is descriptive of Tertullian's style in being averse to abstractions.

D. Tertullian and Rhetoric: Summary

Tertullian's hybrid literature of rhetoric and theology stands out from his contemporaries. The above exploration of his relationship to rhetoric gives some much-needed specificity to his relationship to often ill-defined genre. It also helps to distinguish him among the church fathers and what qualities mark his writings that are not found in other church fathers broadly of his era. Tertullian is lacking in the allegorical approach of Clement of Alexandria and Origen and makes no overtly Platonic appeals

¹⁰⁶ Colish, *The Stoic Tradition From Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, 87.

¹⁰⁷ Barnes, 183, fn 10.

(contra Justin Martyr). “Tertullian would have deplored the attempts of Justin, Clement and Origen to reconcile Christianity and pagan philosophy. He explicitly rejected a Stoic, Platonic or dialectical Christianity.”¹⁰⁸ Since rhetoric is distinguished by its lack of interest in abstractions and ideals, Tertullian’s synthesis with his rhetorical background is a synthesis of method, not content: “[I]n a wider sense, he had himself reconciled Christianity and classical culture. For he used the benefits of a traditional education to defend and to propagate what he considered to be the truth.”¹⁰⁹

Tertullian’s rhetorical training, though it taught him to write in individual treatises, was not a tradition that celebrated atomism of argumentation, but stood out for the very unity of ideas sought in the ideal rhetorician: “One strength of technical rhetoric in contrast to most other ancient critical writing should be noted. It has a concept of unity of the material: it deals with the whole argument, the whole speech...”¹¹⁰ This gives us a glimpse as to how his writings may be read as a whole. Though the rhetorical tradition is predominantly individual treatises, its ideals and concepts provide a framework to how a writer within that literary tradition may have had an eye to a larger literary project, especially if the writer said as much in his own writing. Again, the comparison of Tertullian with Cicero’s works on oratory and politics appear to have significant overlap.

We may say that Tertullian is a rhetor, and his rhetorical education is the primary background behind his hermeneutics. His emphases will be on how he structures his treatises, and these will be along the lines of a persuasive speech that shies away from excessive abstractions, and whose argumentation strategies were tailored to the audience of the treatise.

¹⁰⁸ Barnes, *Tertullian*, 210.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹¹⁰ Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and its Christian and Secular Tradition*, 107.

This thesis defines “rhetoric” as used by Tertullian as a method of reasoning within a literary tradition that sought to arrange the art of argument into patterns of presentation that were thought to be the most persuasive way to present a discourse on a set of ideas, in order to win one’s audience over.

E. The Reception of Rhetoric in Tertullian in the Secondary Literature

Having introduced his literary background, it remains to be asked, in the light of this thesis’ attempt to compile a coherent picture of Tertullian’s hermeneutics, whether such a project may be fairly undertaken. After all, many scholars regard Tertullian’s treatises as internally inconsistent, and beset by the intractable problem that individual treatises are tailored to specific audiences, rather than to be read as a whole.

Many scholars see his rhetoric as a liability to his exegesis, and this rhetorical background is set not as a background, but as an antithesis to the Scriptures, as seen in the following citations: “Tertullian was a rhetorician rather than an exegete or a systematic theologian. Although normally referred to as such, his extant works are not so much ‘treatises’ but ‘polemics’.”¹¹¹ and; “Tertullian’s method is not that of the systematic theologian but that of the literary artist and the master of rhetoric.”¹¹² As will be shown, there is a trend among some scholars to regard theological principles and universals as indistinguishable from the immediate context of Tertullian’s particular treatises. Some contend that Tertullian should be read strictly as a polemicist whose writings do not demonstrate internal consistency or theological unity. What follows is a brief survey of a number of scholars who hold this view. To begin, Geoffrey D. Dunn and John M. G. Barclay are both particularly critical of Tertullian’s internal consistency and find a large amount of internal contradiction within Tertullian’s writings.

¹¹¹ William Tabernee, “The World to Come: Tertullian’s Christian Eschatology,” in *Tertullian and Paul*, 271-272.

¹¹² Robert Dick Sider, “Literary Artifice and the Figure of Paul in the Writings of Tertullian,” in *Paul and the legacies of Paul*, ed. William S. Babcock (Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University Press. 1990), 100.

It must be remembered that he was an occasional writer, always dealing with some controversial topic. If an opponent denied that some requirement in the Hebrew Scriptures still applied because it had been replaced by the new covenant of Jesus, he could argue for the continuing relevance of the old because Jesus had come to fulfill not abolish the old. Yet, equally, on other occasions, could he argue the exact opposite by appealing to more supersessionist passages of the New Testament.¹¹³

Barclay finds these contradictions ultimately licensed to Tertullian by the writing practices of the apostle Paul. “Tertullian is a master of rhetorical invention and can turn different elements of the Biblical tradition to varying purposes according to his argumentative needs . . . In that respect, at least, he resembles Paul, who also produces varying statements on the people of Israel in different letters.”¹¹⁴ Dunn and Barclay simply see Tertullian as using polemics and rhetorical techniques to serve his occasion-bound purposes, without any consideration of broad unity across his treatises. Precise examples of Tertullian arguing positively for both sides of an issue are, however, suspiciously absent in both of these scholar’s writings.

Likewise, Candida Moss sees in Tertullian’s rhetoric a deliberate attempt to mine the Scriptures for support for his own esoteric positions: “In many ways the appeal to Paul as martyrological exemplar is an expedient rhetorical move designed to undermine Paul’s own writings . . . Paul’s writings do not appear to form the theological underpinning for Tertullian’s views on martyrdom; they are invoked strategically and selectively.”¹¹⁵ Considering how much intellectual effort Tertullian makes in defending the Scriptures as the final court of inquiry, Moss’ perspective on Tertullian’s use of Paul involves its own narrow selection of Tertullian’s works. It will be shown later how difficult this is to hold if we take a plain reading of Tertullian’s statements about his respect for the Scriptures.

¹¹³ Geoffrey D. Dunn, “Tertullian, Paul, and the Nation of Israel by Geoffrey D. Dunn,” in *Tertullian and Paul*, 97.

¹¹⁴ John M. G. Barclay, “Tertullian, Paul, and the Nation of Israel: A response to Geoffrey D. Dunn,” in *Tertullian and Paul*, 98.

¹¹⁵ Moss, “The Justification of the Martyrs,” in *Tertullian and Paul*, 113.

Helen Rhee, however, is of the opinion that Tertullian's strictly polemical use of rhetoric applies to anything Tertullian says about hermeneutics. She remarks: "To this end, a consistency is not necessarily his exegetical method or principle, but his controversial and polemical contexts and his vision of Christianity drawn from the scripture; the former is relative to the latter and his audience and style become occasional depending on the particular controversy or argument of the opponents with which he was dealing."¹¹⁶

Similarly, John F. Jahnsen states the following: "One reason why we cannot define precisely his principles of interpreting scripture is because we can never divorce his exegetical method from the controversies in which he was engaged. He is preeminently the controversialist rather than the exegete."¹¹⁷ Fredouille cautions us that Tertullian's hermeneutical statements need to be taken with a grain of salt, and that scholars are "[O]bliged to gather statements often hasty and partial, that one is never certain to interpret (these principles) correctly in their positive meaning, because they are subordinated to the circumstantial imperatives of polemics."¹¹⁸

In summary, according to the above mentioned scholars, Tertullian's exegesis is too closely tied to his immediate circumstances. As such, even Tertullian's own statements of his hermeneutic methods cannot be taken at face value. Rather, express statements of his own hermeneutics are under suspicion of being conveniently adopted for the sake of whatever case he is arguing at the moment. J. H. Waszink states this position plainly: "For we cannot...limit ourselves to collecting a number of general statements by Tertullian which pertain to the subject since, as we all know, Tertullian has a gift for

¹¹⁶ Helen Rhee, "Tertullian and Paul: The Wealth of Christians," in *Tertullian and Paul*, 196.

¹¹⁷ John F. Jahnsen, "Tertullian and the New Testament," *The Second Century* 2, no. 4 (Winter 1982): 191-207, 207.

¹¹⁸ Fredouille, *Tertullien et la Conversion de la Culture Antique*, 337. Translation mine.

presenting a *locus communis* adapted *ad hoc* as one of his firm and lasting convictions.”¹¹⁹ This suggests, as noted above, that such statements by Tertullian need to be treated quite carefully. Unequivocally, if scholars desire to peer into Tertullian’s genuine operating principles, they need to look for statements that are in accord with “[T]he general tendencies of his argumentation and of his conviction as a Christian.”¹²⁰

Such are the criticisms levelled against the Carthaginian. His treatises differ in style and argumentation, and this is the fundamental problem. However, seldom are specific texts from treatises placed side by side with a clear contradiction or change of opinion demonstrated. The difference in style and argument is simply assumed as sufficient evidence that Tertullian held either a fluctuating attitude towards the Scripture itself or that he had no regard for unity of thought across his treatises.¹²¹

There are other scholars, however, who are not so skeptical about Tertullian’s hermeneutical methods. Nor do they see his appropriation of the rhetorical tradition as a liability to his exegesis. What follows is a brief look at the opinions of this smaller group. Some scholars believe that the status of “rhetor” has become an unfortunate prejudice to place on Tertullian: “The Carthaginian has long been a victim of the prejudice that made him a “rhetorician,” that is, a writer resorting to the most worn literary paths and using the arsenal of rhetorical figures of speech.”¹²² Fredouille, though often critical, also sees in Tertullian a redeemer of the classical tradition, a man who uses rhetorical tools to persuade others of the truth of his faith. With regards to Cicero’s classic introduction to rhetoric, in which he asks

¹¹⁹ *Locus communis* Latin for “a common topic.” *Ad hoc* Latin for “To this”; generally signifies a solution designed for a specific problem or task, and not intended to be able to be adapted to other purposes. J. H. Waszink, “Tertullian’s Principles and Methods of Exegesis,” in *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition. In Honorem Robert M. Grant*, William R. Schoedel and Robert L. Wilken eds (Paris, France Editions Beauchesne, 1979), 26.

¹²⁰ Waszink, “Tertullian’s Principles and Methods of Exegesis,” 27.

¹²¹ O’Malley, *Tertullian and the Bible*, 134.

¹²² Fredouille, *Tertullien et la Conversion de la Culture Antique*, 482. Translation mine.

whether skill in language is good for society or not, Fredouille notes that Tertullian would squarely be one who used eloquence to advance wisdom rather than distort it.¹²³

Ben Witherington III also responds to disparaging views of Tertullian as a theologian and exegete as follows: “I do not agree with the notion that we should simply see Tertullian as a brilliant rhetorician instead of being a systematic thinker or exegete. While the modern phrase ‘systematic theologian’ may be pressing things too far, it will not do to underestimate the theological and logical prowess of Tertullian when it comes to major theological ideas.”¹²⁴ Witherington thus sees in much Tertullian scholarship an excessive criticism that is in need of correction.

In his work on the history of African Christianity, Paul Monceaux responds to the dismissal of Tertullian as a polemicist with a glowing evaluation of his use of rhetoric: “He borrows much from his predecessors, but he brings much more from deep within; he revitalizes and makes his mark on everything he touches. In the end, he knew how to make theology a living work, by the ardor of conviction, by personality and imagination. If he is considered to be one of the most vigorous of the polemicists, he is probably the most witty and amusing of theologians.”¹²⁵ For these scholars, Tertullian’s use of rhetoric is virtuous. For these scholars, his rhetorical training is not seen in antithesis to his exegesis or his theology. An evaluation of these competing assessments will briefly follow.

On the one hand, the subversion of Paul which Moss sees in Tertullian’s exegesis, and Dunn and Barclay’s accusation that Tertullian finds licence to contradict himself because Paul did it first, is overstated, and poorly demonstrated. Paul’s self-contradiction is simply stated with no demonstration,

¹²³ Cicero, *De Inventione* I.1.

¹²⁴ Ben Witherington III, “His Eminence Immanent: Tertullian’s take on Pauline Eschatology,” in *Tertullian and Paul*, 279.

¹²⁵ Paul Monceaux, *Histoire littéraire de l’Afrique Chrétienne*, vol.1, *Tertullien et les Origines* (Paris, France: E Leroux, 1901), 335.

and Tertullian is treated similarly.¹²⁶ A lack of demonstration gives no weight to a position other than that of scholarly authority, which Tertullian's detractors can fairly lay claim to, some being well respected patristic scholars. On the other hand, Fredouille, and Monceaux are no patristic slouches, so other than quantity of scholarly opinion, this argument is at best a stalemate between these two groups, neither giving thorough demonstration of their positions.

An argument, or more of a warning, can perhaps be advanced about scholarly presuppositions. Paul Ricoeur identified a method of hermeneutics that he called "The school of suspicion"¹²⁷ that is worth careful consideration in the biases of scholars, particularly scholars of religion or religious history. This method of reading texts is "[A] distinctively modern style of interpretation that circumvents obvious or self-evident meanings in order to draw out less visible and less flattering truths. Ricoeur's term has sustained an energetic after-life within religious studies, as well as in philosophy, intellectual history, and related fields..."¹²⁸ This method appears to be in use by scholars such as O' Malley in regards to Tertullian's alleged skepticism towards the Scriptures, and it is barely contained in the overt accusations of Moss.¹²⁹ Moss' assumptions about Tertullian's selectivity of material implies the only acceptable method of argument is a comprehensive survey of scriptural-textual data. Since Tertullian was selective, this implies an intent to undermine Paul's authority. This suspicious posture towards Tertullian is also plainly stated by Waszink, who eschews methods that take Tertullian's statements of hermeneutic principle at face value.¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Barclay, "Tertullian, Paul, and the Nation of Israel: A response to Geoffrey D. Dunn," in *Tertullian and Paul*, 98.

¹²⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 32.

¹²⁸ Rita Felski, "Critique and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion", *M/C Journal* [Online], Volume 15, no. 1 (26 November 2011). No pages.

¹²⁹ O' Malley, *Tertullian and the Bible*, 134; Moss, "The Justification of the Martyrs," 113.

¹³⁰ Waszink, "Tertullian's Principles and Methods of Exegesis," 27.

The “school of suspicion” way of reading of Tertullian involves a preference for reading between the lines of his treatises in order to determine an underlying attitude rather than emphasizing his clear statements. This thesis does not sympathize with hermeneutical methods that bend over backwards to find underlying motives and subtle shifts in the unwritten attitudes of ancient writers that circumvent otherwise plain statements.

A presupposition of suspicion is best refuted by contrary evidence, which will have to await until the fourth chapter, where an attempt is made to lay out Tertullian’s hermeneutics via his own plain statements. There it will be argued that Tertullian does indeed evince somewhat of a unified system of thought that determines his interpretation of the Scriptures. This thesis’ own presupposition is that it is improper to read so much between the lines that Tertullian’s plain statements are no longer taken as such. If one who has been called “the best Biblicist of antiquity”¹³¹ can be read to be a Biblical skeptic, or interpreted to be subversively seeking to undermine the authority of Paul, it seems he can be made to say anything.

This thesis makes the modest assumption that the controlling centre of properly understanding Tertullian is the plain statement of his own ideas. Indeed, in collating his many hermeneutical statements across his treatises, this thesis needs to assume Tertullian wanted his reader to accept the basic veracity of these statements in order for his arguments to be persuasive. Coupled with his statement at the end of *De Prescriptio* that this treatise functions as a presentation of basic principles to which other treatises are to follow, seems to warrant accepting this at face value unless countervailing evidence is presented.

¹³¹ *Luther: Lectures on Romans*, The Library of Christian Classics, vol. XV, Wilhelm Pauck, ed., (Philadelphia, PN: Westminster, 1951), xl.

Any other reading of Tertullian seems to make it impossible to understand much of what is written at all. If Tertullian cannot be left free to have his own statements read at face value, what is left to any reading of him? How can the “general tendencies of his argumentation and of his conviction as a Christian” be established apart from his own most explicit statements of those convictions?¹³² The end state of Tertullian scholarship would be to leave Tertullian’s treatises as fragmented polemical works, with his “real meaning” lost in the whirling sands of a rhetorical artist. There would be no theologian or exegete of note, and little coherency across treatises. This would be a peculiar conclusion to come to for a writer who had such profound influence on the development of Latin theology.

Something similar may be said in response to whether or not Tertullian was an exegete. Whether one wants to extend this title to Tertullian, this thesis is content with observing that Tertullian engaged in copious amounts of exegesis, and that this quality of his writings is generally under-appreciated, as several modern patristic and New Testament scholars have recently stated.¹³³ The title of exegete is accurate insofar as it is a component of much of Tertullian’s work, without implying that he was a writer of commentaries. In the interest of accuracy, perhaps it would be better to regard Tertullian’s work as proto-exegetical. Sider explains: “[O]ne cannot properly speak of ‘exegesis’ until the fourth century, for the Bible was used in the early centuries primarily for proof in controversy or apology. Nevertheless, Tertullian’s scriptural proofs are normally accompanied by exposition, and we are still in the process of defining its source and character.”¹³⁴

¹³² Waszink, “Tertullian’s Principles and Methods of Exegesis,” 27.

¹³³ Sill and Wilhite, ed. *Tertullian and Paul*, xviii.

¹³⁴ Robert Dick Sider, “Approaches to Tertullian: A Study of Recent Scholarship,” *The Second Century* 2, no. 4 (Winter 1982): 228-260, 245.

The Christian tradition of Biblical commentaries emerged out of the classical tradition of commenting on ancient Greek and Latin authors.¹³⁵ In Tertullian's time, this literature had not yet come to maturity, thus exegesis as one would recognize it today did not emerge until the work of Hillary and Jerome. "In the time of Tertullian there did not yet exist -a fact often overlooked- detailed commentaries on Vergil and Cicero that could be compared to the commentaries on Homer, Pindar and Demosthenes which were so important for the development of the technique of exegesis in general, and consequently also for Christian exegesis."¹³⁶ Titles aside, the primary concern of this thesis is that Tertullian's exegetical abilities and efforts are not minimized under the rubric of his title as a rhetor. Within the expectations of the literature of the era, there is no better effort at articulating principles of hermeneutics to be found than within the writings of Tertullian.

In summary, this thesis takes it as a fair practice to read Tertullian as a thinker who sought to address theological problems through the application of a fairly consistent set of authoritative principles. One notes that this will become clearer in the specifics of chapter four. Irrespective, Tertullian executed this literary intention and project through the means of individual rhetorical treatises topically chosen. Tertullian should not, however, be read as so situational that his treatises, at least those mentioned by Daniélou, cannot be read together as a larger project.

¹³⁵ Stanley E. Porter, "Big Enough is Big Enough: A Review Article," *Trinity Journal* 37, no.1 (2016): 31-45. 32.

¹³⁶ Waszink, "Tertullian's Principles and Methods of Exegesis," 18.

Chapter 2

Tertullian and the Scriptures

A. The Nature of the Scriptures

Before embarking on a discussion of Tertullian's specific principles, it is helpful to discuss Tertullian's understanding of the nature of the Scriptures. Tertullian regards this as something of a prerequisite to much of his argumentation against Marcion. "I find it necessary to set forth the form and, so to speak, the nature of the Scriptures themselves."¹³⁷ By the "form and nature" of the Scriptures, Tertullian means the Scripture's literary qualities, and in *Against Marcion*, he speaks much about issues of allegory, parable, and literal hermeneutics/exegesis vs. figurative/typological language.

1. The Unity of the Bible

One of the first things to emerge when Tertullian talks about the scriptures is his strong sense of their unity. He regards the Scriptures as internally consistent and unified, and this internal consistency is something guaranteed by God himself as the author of the Scriptures.¹³⁸

This view of the Scriptures is frequently appealed to, especially in his arguments with Marcion's positing of a dichotomy between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. Tertullian makes such frequent appeal to the unity of the Testaments in determining exegesis, that it is possible to suggest this is a principle of exegesis in itself. Tertullian steadfastly refuses to interpret the Scriptures in a way that is inconsistent with itself as a whole. ". . . In as much as

¹³⁷ Tertullian, *Adv. Marcion*, 3.5.1.

¹³⁸ Peter Iver Kaufman, "Tertullian on Heresy, History, and the Reappropriation of Revelation," *Church History* 43, no. 1 (March 1974): 17-25.

it is easier to believe that that one passage should have some explanation agreeable with the others, then that an apostle should seem to have taught principles mutually diverse.”¹³⁹

For Tertullian, Scripture cannot contradict itself. As such, any interpretation that pits one passage against another is immediately regarded as incorrect. If we may consider this to be a principle, it is a principle of exclusion: while it may not help us determine the positive meaning of a text of the Scriptures, for Tertullian, it is a principle which excludes certain other interpretations. It is a principle which narrows the scope of plausible readings of a passage. Tertullian does admit to ambiguous passages in the Scriptures, with various plausible interpretations, but no reading is afforded the liberty of contradicting other parts of Scripture.

2. The Divine Authorship of the Scriptures

The doctrine of divine authorship of the Scriptures features prominently in Tertullian’s writings.¹⁴⁰ After a litany of verses condemning idolatry, Tertullian remarks: “And why should I, a man of limited memory, suggest anything further? Why recall anything from the Scriptures? As if either the voice of the Holy Spirit were not sufficient; or else any further deliberation were needful.”¹⁴¹

Tertullian’s belief in divine authorship of the Scriptures leads him to use divine authorial intent as a mechanism to refute interpretations which stand at odds with the stated purpose of the text. Tertullian’s belief in divine intent behind the Scriptures is rooted in John 20:31. Addressing the controversies about the Trinity, he states that any reading of a text that goes against the definite purpose of the text is incoherent. “Whenever, therefore, you take any of the statements of this Gospel, and apply them to demonstrate the identity of the Father and the Son, supposing that they serve your views

¹³⁹ Tertullian, *De Monogamia*, 11.8.

¹⁴⁰ O’Malley, *Tertullian and the Bible*, 123.

¹⁴¹ Tertullian, *De Idololatria*, 4.5.

therein, you are contending against the definite purpose of the Gospel. For these things certainly are not written that you may believe that Jesus Christ is the Father, but the Son.”¹⁴²

3. The Language of the Scriptures

For Tertullian, the Scriptures are a book written in popular speech, as explained by Sider: “For Tertullian, the ‘popular’ language was the speech of Christians firmly oriented toward the Bible. His language, therefore, has many stylistic features which are properly Biblical, such as love of antitheses, a feature also rooted in popular speech.”¹⁴³ This rather mundane observation has a lot of import for Tertullian. It forms the basis for which Tertullian can argue that the Scriptures speak in “an ordinary manner”, and conform to normal rules of logic, grammar, and speech: “[F]or we read, ‘And yet He used not to baptize, but His disciples!’ As if, in truth, John had preached that He would baptize with His own hands! Of course, his words are not so to be understood, but as simply spoken after an ordinary manner; just as, for instance, we say, ‘The emperor set forth an edict,’ or, ‘The prefect cudgelled him.’ Pray does the emperor in person set forth, or the prefect in person cudgel?”¹⁴⁴

B. The Apostles

Related to the nature of the scriptures and their divine authorship is apostolic authority, which comes up frequently in Tertullian’s writings. A number of features highlight his strong regard for their infallibility and divine authority. They include the following:

¹⁴² Tertullian, *Adv. Praxeaus*, 25.4.

¹⁴³ Sider, “Approaches to Tertullian: A Study of Recent Scholarship,” 242.

¹⁴⁴ Tertullian, *De Baptismo*, 11.1.

1. The Infallibility of the Apostles

According to Tertullian, the apostles were commissioned by God with the authority to write the New Testament documents. “We lay it down as our first position, that the evangelical Testament has apostles for its authors, to whom was assigned by the Lord Himself this office of publishing the gospel.”¹⁴⁵ For Tertullian, to suggest the apostles err is to suggest that Christ erred who appointed them: “When Marcion complains that apostles are suspected (for their prevarication and dissimulation) of having even depraved the gospel, he thereby accuses Christ, by accusing those whom Christ chose.”¹⁴⁶

2. The Hierarchy of Apostles

Tertullian also speaks of a hierarchy among the apostles, and therefore among their writings. His doctrine of apostolic authority thus includes the category of apostolic men such as Mark and Luke. Their authority to write was delegated to them by more authoritative apostles.

Luke, however, was not an apostle, but only an apostolic man; not a master, but a disciple, and so inferior to a master—at least as far subsequent to him as the apostle whom he followed (and that, no doubt, was Paul) was subsequent to the others; so that, had Marcion even published his Gospel in the name of St. Paul himself, the single authority of the document, destitute of all support from preceding authorities, would not be sufficient basis for our faith.¹⁴⁷

Tertullian is here making a hypothetical argument about succession among the apostles. That is, if Paul wrote on his own in contradiction to the other apostles, his writings alone would have insufficient authority. Since he is lower in the hierarchy of apostles, he depends on the witness of more authoritative apostles to validate his message as authoritative. In Marcion’s scheme, Paul was

¹⁴⁵ Tertullian, *Adv. Marcion*, 4.2.1.

¹⁴⁶ Tertullian, *Adv. Marcion*, 4.3.4.

¹⁴⁷ Tertullian, *Adv. Marcion*, 4.2.4.

something of a renegade apostle, which Tertullian argues would not be sufficient to claim apostolic authority. The apostles are a plural body, and have an order among themselves that preserves doctrinal authority and continuity of teaching.

3. The Powers of the Apostles

Tertullian held that the office of apostle was accompanied by certain powers. This included the power of forgiving sin, healing the sick, and raising the dead. In *De Modestia*, Tertullian challenges the claims of his opponents whom he calls “psychics”, challenging them to manifest the powers of an apostle or prophet: “Exhibit therefore even now to me, apostolic sir, prophetic evidences, that I may recognize your Divine virtue, and vindicate to yourself the power of remitting such sins!”¹⁴⁸ For Tertullian, at issue is the claim to forgive sins of immodesty which he says are not possible to forgive apart from a Montanist penitential system. In *De Modestia*, much discussion is given to the nature of apostolic authority to forgive sins, whereas in *De Prescriptio*, emphasis is given to supernatural wonders and prophecy: “[H]ow that they raised the dead, restored the sick, foretold the future, that so they might deservedly be regarded as apostles.”¹⁴⁹

These apostolic powers were the product of the apostles being given full and proper possession of the Holy Spirit: “For apostles have the Holy Spirit properly, who have Him fully, in the operations of prophecy, and the efficacy of (healing) virtues, and the evidences of the tongues; not partially, as all others have.”¹⁵⁰ The power and authority granted to the apostles by the Holy Spirit also included the power to interpret and apply the Old Testament. Tertullian argues that at the Jerusalem council in Acts 15, the apostles have the right to select from the Old Testament which laws are to be absolutely obeyed,

¹⁴⁸ Tertullian, *De Pudicitia*, 21.5.

¹⁴⁹ Tertullian, *De Prescriptio*, 44.5.

¹⁵⁰ Tertullian, *De Exhortatione Castitatis*, 4.6.

which are the most important, and which commandments are remissible. “Well, then, in what light do the apostles will those crimes to appear which alone they select...from the pristine law?...These alone they put in the foremost rank, of course as not remissible; (they,) who, for the heathen’s sake, made the other burdens of the law remissible.”¹⁵¹

Tertullian articulates a doctrine of apostolic succession. Apostolic authority is not given merely by the succession of the apostolic office through the bishops, but through conformity to apostolic teaching, conceived as the combination of the Scriptures and the rule of faith.

The apostles stand as *auctores*, not only through the succession of bishops, but also through their writings and through the rule of faith. The apostles, and not the bishops, are the *auctores*, and theirs is the *auctoritas*. They speak through scripture, through the rule of faith, and through their successors in the episcopacy. Therefore, the authority of the bishops does not derive from the physical succession, but from the fact that they hold the faith of the apostles.¹⁵²

So, although there is succession and sequence among the apostles, this is not an authority that exists independent of the apostles living faithful lives and teaching faithful doctrine. “[T]heir legitimacy is not so much that of an office transmitted to them from the apostles as the *consanguinitas* of what they teach and what the apostles taught.”¹⁵³

4. The Lives of the Apostles

It is not merely their succession from Christ, their teaching, their power, and their writing that sums up Tertullian’s understanding of the apostles. For him, the apostle’s lives and writing style also provided behavioural and literary norms to be emulated. His frequently biting literary style is in turn

¹⁵¹ Tertullian, *De Pudicitia*, 12.6.

¹⁵² Justo L. Gonzalez, “Athens and Jerusalem Revisited: Reason and Authority in Tertullian,” *Church History* 43, no. 1, (March 1974): 17-25, 24.

¹⁵³ Allen Brent, “Tertullian on the Role of the Bishop” in *Tertullian and Paul*, 173.

derived from the style of the apostle Paul: “the apostle provided a model and offered an authority for Tertullian’s biting tone.”¹⁵⁴

Paul’s life in particular is put into rhetorical relief as an ideal for Tertullian’s doctrine of martyrdom. He uses Paul’s ignoring of Agabus’ prophecy in *De Fuga* 8 and again in *Scorpiace* 15:4-5 as proof. Similarly, Paul’s refusal to pay Felix for his escape (Acts 24:26) reveals him to be “the ideal martyr.”¹⁵⁵ Tertullian sees Paul’s behaviour as “[N]eglectful of all means to secure himself from the persecutions which had been foretold as about to occur there”,¹⁵⁶ and this conduct is regarded by Tertullian as a strong argument for normative Christian behaviour in the face of persecution. Commenting on this phenomenon, Robert Sider regards this practice of Tertullian to be superficial in character, and more of a practice of carefully selected texts, for the purpose of advancing Tertullian’s idiomatic theology. “Tertullian’s allusions are generally not focused on Paul in his own right but rather on the import of the events in which Paul was involved.”¹⁵⁷

However, the frequency of Tertullian’s appeals to apostles as exemplars seems deeper than a mere convenient buttress for argument. The rhetorical *exempla* means that he considers the lives of the apostles as truly normative for a Christian’s conduct. It is noteworthy that this practice of holding up the apostles as exemplars is not a practice restricted to the apostles alone. The Holy men of the Scriptures are all held up as exemplars, and it is a principle of Tertullian’s exegesis to hold the lives of these characters as normative, in that their lives demonstrate the authenticity of Scriptural morality. They become living Scriptures, as it were.

¹⁵⁴ Sider, “Approaches to Tertullian: A Study of Recent Scholarship,” 243.

¹⁵⁵ Tertullian, *De Fuga in Persecutione*, 6.8; Sider, “Literary Artifice and the Figure of Paul in the Writings of Tertullian,” 106.

¹⁵⁶ Tertullian, *De Fuga in Persecutione*, 12.10.

¹⁵⁷ Sider, “Literary Artifice and the Figure of Paul in the Writings of Tertullian,” 105.

Since the apostles were divinely chosen by Christ, their written work is to be interpreted in conformity with their lives. “That Tertullian uses Paul’s personal history -as inferred from Canonical texts -to combat miss-readings of Paul, is an interesting and distinctive feature of his work.”¹⁵⁸ Despite presenting Tertullian’s use of Paul as superficially selective, Sider nonetheless feels comfortable stating that; “In the literary art and rhetorical design of Tertullian, the life of Paul can be as important as his thought.”¹⁵⁹ The same may be said of Tertullian’s use of the lives of the other apostles: “The apostles did not commend the precept to flee from city to city. How could they when they were writing from prison or an island exile? Paul bade us stand firm in the faith (Eph 6:14ff). John stated that cowardice was incompatible with love of God (1 Jn 4:18). And if men heed the Spirit, the Spirit exhorts all men to martyrdom.”¹⁶⁰

5. The Churches of the Apostles

Lastly, the apostles also feature in Tertullian’s writing as those who confer special significance on the churches with which they were connected, especially the church of Rome: “Since, moreover, you are close upon Italy, you have Rome, from which there comes even into our own hands the very authority (of apostles themselves). How happy, is its church, on which apostles poured forth all their doctrine along with their blood! Where Peter endures a passion like his Lord’s! Where Paul wins his crown in a death like John’s, where the Apostle John was first plunged, unhurt, into boiling oil, and thence remitted to his island-exile!”¹⁶¹ This ecclesiastical dignity also extends to churches affiliated

¹⁵⁸ Moss, “The Justification of the Martyrs,” 117-118.

¹⁵⁹ Sider, “Literary Artifice and the Figure of Paul in the Writings of Tertullian,” 100.

¹⁶⁰ Tertullian, *De Fuga in Persecutione*, 9.4.

¹⁶¹ Tertullian, *De Prescriptio*, 26.2-3.

with “apostolic men”: “... I have proposed as models those churches which were founded by apostles or apostolic men; and antedecently I think, to certain founders, who shall be nameless.”¹⁶²

C. Canon

With Tertullian’s doctrine of both apostles and “apostolic men”, it remains to be asked what books exactly composed the canon of Scripture in Tertullian’s thought? Tertullian’s writings contain “[Q]uotations and allusions to all the Old Testament canonical and deuterocanonical books except Ruth, Obadiah, 1 Chronicles, Esther and 2 Maccabees.”¹⁶³ Tertullian has citations or clear allusions to all of the New Testament books except James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John.¹⁶⁴ Tertullian does speak of a canon,¹⁶⁵ and acknowledges controverted books such as Hebrews with more or less certainty, as well as an apocryphal body of literature: “But why need we care, since these philosophers have also made their attacks upon those writings which are condemned by us under the title of apocryphal, certain as we are that nothing ought to be received which does not agree with the true system of prophecy, which has arisen in the present age...”¹⁶⁶

Tertullian’s understanding of canon admits of gradations of authority, just as the apostles held gradations of authority. Disputed books like Hebrews are held at a “slightly lower level, though accepted as Canonical”¹⁶⁷ He compares Hebrews, held by him to be written by Barnabas, as being more generally accepted than the Shepherd of Hermas, a book which he regards with great disdain: “The Epistle of Barnabas is more generally received among the Churches than that apocryphal

¹⁶² Tertullian, *De Velandis Virginibus*, 2.2.

¹⁶³ Ferguson, “Tertullian,” 318.

¹⁶⁴ Jahnsen, “Tertullian and the New Testament,” 191.

¹⁶⁵ Tertullian, *De Monogamia*, 7.1.

¹⁶⁶ Tertullian, *De Anima*, 2.3.

¹⁶⁷ O’Malley, *Tertullian and the Bible*, 120.

‘Shepherd’ of adulterers.”¹⁶⁸ Tertullian appeals to church councils to buttress his rejection of the Shepherd of Hermas. “If the Scripture of ‘the Shepherd’ ...had deserved to find a place in the Divine canon; if it had not been habitually judged by every council of Churches (even of your own) among apocryphal and false (writings)...”¹⁶⁹

Tertullian makes an argument for the inclusion of the book of Enoch in the canon of scripture. “I am aware that the scripture of Enoch...is not received by some, because it is not admitted into the Jewish canon either.”¹⁷⁰ In this chapter, he judges that the document was authored by Enoch, preserved by Noah, and compares this literary restoration to Ezra’s restoration of Jewish literature after the Babylonian exile. He suspects the Jews rejected it because of its references to Christ, and he argues that the citation of Enoch by the apostle is a witness to its canonical status.

Tertullian is clearly aware of the contested status of Enoch, as well as of the book of Hebrews. Since most of his writing is concerned with presenting the most compelling argument he can, Tertullian regularly concedes that he does not expect his opponents to assume these works as canonical. “Tertullian would certainly have liked to add Enoch to the Old and Hebrews to the New Testament; but he contents himself with commending the testimony of these works and with justifying his own appeal to them. He is not striving for any ‘reform’ of the Bible.”¹⁷¹

Most of Tertullian’s use of 1 Enoch is found in his work *De Cultu Feminarum*, where Tertullian makes use of Enoch 8:1-3, the revelation to women of the secrets of vanity in dress and behaviour.

¹⁶⁸ Tertullian, *De Pudicitia*, 20.2.

¹⁶⁹ Tertullian, *De Pudicitia*, 10.12.

¹⁷⁰ Tertullian, *De Cultu Feminarum*, 1.3.1.

¹⁷¹ Hans Von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1972), 193.

Other than this, Tertullian only appeals to 1 Enoch for issues relating to the Sabbath,¹⁷² the prediction of an age of idolatry,¹⁷³ and general lists of righteous people.

For all of Tertullian's reference to Scripture, the apocrypha, and the excluded books, some scholars hold it is inappropriate to describe Tertullian as holding to a canon as such.

Although one cannot claim that Tertullian knew a closed collection of New Testament books, his frequent references to a 'New Testament' and use of 'Scripture' for New Testament writings make evident that he had a definite entity in mind (e.g. *Against the Jews* 9; *Against Praxeas* 15; *Prescription Against Heretics* 17; 38) and that by his usage it included certainly the four gospels, Acts, thirteen letters of Paul, Hebrews, 1 Peter, 1 John, Jude and Revelation.¹⁷⁴

In this sense, it is best to regard Tertullian's concept of canon as reflective of his era: among confessing Christians, unanimity of opinion had not yet emerged, and disputed books were treated accordingly.

Tertullian's writings give a very interesting picture of the fluid state of the canon during his time. He acknowledges where there are disputes over books, names them, and rests no argument upon disputed texts. Nevertheless, his own thinking on the canon appears fairly settled, and the "definite entity in mind" should not be understated. He speaks of a canon,¹⁷⁵ and "the collection of sacred Scriptures."¹⁷⁶ There is also his insistence that he has not "introduced any corrupt text into the Scriptures"¹⁷⁷ and his objection that Marcion "expressly and openly used the knife, not the pen, since he made such an excision of the Scriptures as suited his own subject matter"¹⁷⁸ Appears to assume a definitive body of writings. How can Tertullian object to introducing texts, or Marcion removing texts if there was no definite body of writings to introduce or remove texts from? For Tertullian, the

¹⁷² Tertullian, *Adversus Judaeos*, 4.

¹⁷³ Tertullian, *De Idololatria*, 4.15.

¹⁷⁴ Ferguson, "Tertullian," 318.

¹⁷⁵ Tertullian, *De Cultu Feminarum*, 1.3.1; *De Pudicitia*, 10.12.

¹⁷⁶ Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, 47.3.

¹⁷⁷ Tertullian, *De Prescriptio* 38.6.

¹⁷⁸ Tertullian, *De Prescriptio*, 47.9.

Scriptures are no mere collection of writings, but are “His book”¹⁷⁹, they are Divine¹⁸⁰, with every prophecy inspired by God: “They are uttered by the same voices, they are written in the same books-the same Spirit inspires them.”¹⁸¹ He speaks of “the harmony of the divine Scriptures.”¹⁸² Also, Tertullian claims that “the statements, however, of holy Scripture will never be discordant with truth.”¹⁸³ How can there be harmony of the Scriptures, if there are no defined texts? This robust confidence in the Scriptures points strongly towards a defined canon of books regarded as authoritative texts inspired by God. He also gives several references to rejected apocryphal books, indicating he was familiar with some disputes that appear to have settled. Ironically, though Tertullian gives witness to the unsettled issue of canon, that does not mean the issue was unsettled in his own mind.

For the purposes of this thesis, Tertullian’s “Scripture” and “canon” is sufficiently familiar and coherent to warrant being called “Scripture” and “canon” in a very similar sense to how we would use those terms today. This is not to minimize developments surrounding the Scriptures in the coming centuries, but grants Tertullian the audacity to have a defined canon of his own, which is strongly hinted at in his writings. The reader can bear in mind that these terms are used with the caveat of the nuances of late second century Christianity and the disputations about the canon that were still alive at the time. On the whole, this should not detract from the overall coherence of Tertullian’s reference to Scripture being a definite body of literature. The biggest dissimilarity that the contemporary reader would find with Tertullian’s understanding of the Scripture is the inclusion of Enoch, and the gradations of authority within the canon of Scripture itself. Even these dissimilarities never feature

¹⁷⁹ Tertullian, *De Testimonio Animae*, 5.

¹⁸⁰ Tertullian, *Adversus Iudaeos*, 1.6-7; 9.11; 11.11.

¹⁸¹ Tertullian, *De Apologeticus*, 20.4.

¹⁸² Tertullian, *Adversus Iudaeos*, 14.11.

¹⁸³ Tertullian, *De Testimonio Animae*, 21.5.

prominently in any of Tertullian's arguments, with the exception of the caveats he makes over Enoch, Hebrews and the Shepherd of Hermas already mentioned.

Chapter 3

Tertullian's Hermeneutics

A. The Possibility of Finding Tertullian's Hermeneutics

The project of compiling a coherent picture of Tertullian's hermeneutics is fraught with a number of difficulties which some scholars have attempted to overcome. Some believe the project is a lost cause and that statements of exegetical practice in Tertullian are not what they appear to be. T.P. O' Malley argues that "Tertullian is quite often a very different exegete than his own rules might permit him to be."¹⁸⁴ In other words, Tertullian's actual practice of scriptural interpretation is quite different from the principles he claims to hold to, thereby undermining the idea that Tertullian has any real principles of exegesis at all. Others see in Tertullian's work a sustained appeal to principles of exegesis, with literary output designed specifically to define correct hermeneutics.¹⁸⁵ Karl Holl remarked that no one of his own time had formulated the norms of good exegesis as well as Tertullian.¹⁸⁶

This thesis agrees more with the outlook of Holl than O' Malley, as this seems more consistent with Tertullian's own statements of the value of correct exegetical principles: "We are as much bound to keep the sense of the Lord as his precepts. Transgression in interpretation is not lighter than in conversation."¹⁸⁷ For Tertullian, correctly interpreting the Scriptures is a moral imperative in the same category as obeying the Lord's commands. This does seem to be a genuine conviction of his, and his fidelity (or not) in applying those principles across the board should not detract from the fact that he did articulate principles, and we can attempt to identify what those principles were.

¹⁸⁴ O' Malley, *Tertullian and the Bible*, 118.

¹⁸⁵ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study*, 91.

¹⁸⁶ O' Malley, *Tertullian and the Bible*, 130.

¹⁸⁷ Tertullian, *De Pudicitia*, 9.22.

B. The Problem of Underlying Unity in Tertullian's Treatises

As mentioned in the first chapter, one of the hurdles facing this thesis' hypothesis are the numerous scholars who view Tertullian's rhetorical background as a liability to his hermeneutics. Specifically, they see a problem of reading his stated principles apart from the occasions he was addressing in his specific treatises. Because this thesis claims Tertullian has eight rules, and these rules are gathered from across his treatises, it would be helpful to discuss some of the ways scholars do see unity across his treatises.

There are two competing perspectives among scholars who see a controlling motif in Tertullian's treatises, as represented in the work of Helen Rhee and Gerald Bray. The issue is whether to identify the underlying unity as a, basically, ethical one, or more of an epistemological one. This discussion is worth bringing up because both of these schools of thought affect how Tertullian handles the Scriptures. This thesis will modify and adopt the suggestions of one, and reject the other.

Gerald Bray says that Tertullian cannot be properly understood outside of his all-encompassing concern for holiness. "The student who would understand Tertullian must understand above all that his life was the pursuit of holiness in the presence of the living God."¹⁸⁸ For Bray then, the golden thread that unites Tertullian's treatises is Christian sanctity. This ethical theme will come up later in this thesis as one of the eight rules. That is, Tertullian's ethical presuppositions become hermeneutical rules which exegesis must conform to; thus, it can be seen as an exegetical principle.

A different reading of Tertullian's priorities and emphases is given to us by Helen Rhee, who sees in Tertullian's arguments an ultimate desire to resolve the issue of doubt, thereby casting him as a man who seeks certainty. Addressing Tertullian's hermeneutics, she says that Tertullian's hermeneutic concerns were still subject to the most fundamental goal of his writings: "[T]o attain a certitude that the

¹⁸⁸ Gerald L. Bray, *Holiness and the Will of God* (London, UK: Butler & Tanner, 1979), 31.

opponent cannot undermine by any form of argument.” and “[A] clarity which admit of no ambiguity, whether in combating heretics, defending Christianity against pagans, or persuading or debating with fellow Christians.”¹⁸⁹ Similarly, other scholars have also held the view that Tertullian’s primary *modus operandi* is to be seen as a kind of faith vs. science debate, where the root of Tertullian’s concerns is to try to arrive at certainty.¹⁹⁰ Compared to Bray’s emphasis of Tertullian’s ethical concerns, Rhee’s school of thought sees a greater emphasis on epistemic concerns.

While there are many epistemological statements in Tertullian’s writing that could be of relevance to epistemology, these statements are best understood as stemming from his rhetorical background. After all, the original goal of rhetorical training was to try to come up with the most persuasive argument possible in a public forum, often a court of law.¹⁹¹ This means that in Tertullian, the focus on convincing arguments stems more from the rhetorical tradition’s concerns to persuade: “The task of the public speaker is to discuss capably those matters that law and custom have fixed for the uses of citizenship and to secure as far as possible the agreement of his hearers.”¹⁹² This rhetorical emphasis on achieving persuasion should be considered in combination with Tertullian’s general distaste for abstract philosophy. His education taught him to be concerned with persuasion and flow of argument. He disliked and avoided abstractions. Is it likely that his true concern was to resolve an abstract concern about certainty? An abstract concern for finding certainty is never explicitly stated, but an intent to persuade and demonstrate is often stated.¹⁹³ Whatever one makes of the epistemic concerns of Tertullian, it appears the stronger argument is to relate these concerns to his immediate context,

¹⁸⁹ Rhee, “Tertullian and Paul,” 196.

¹⁹⁰ Waszink, “Tertullian’s Principles and Methods of Exegesis,” 19.

¹⁹¹ Murphy and Katula, *A Synoptic History of Classical Rhetoric*, 136.

¹⁹² *Rhetorica ad Herrenium*, 1.2.

¹⁹³ *De Res Carnis* 18; *De Corona* 10; *De Anima* 37.

training, and personal proclivities rather than to a philosophical debate that emerged in the post-Cartesian world.

There exists then for some scholars a definite thread seen in Tertullian's work that unifies his treatises. While it may be pedagogically desirable to try to distill the thought of Tertullian into a single guiding principle, this practice does not seem suitable for such a complex thinker. Bray's attempt to summarize Tertullian's primary interest as "holiness" appears more faithful to Tertullian's writing than Helen Rhee's summation of Tertullian's interest in "certainty". Though this thesis sees Rhee's model as anachronistic, she does nevertheless identify a unifying theme: Tertullian's concern to persuade. Her work abstracts this theme to an epistemic concern about certainty. The observation about a concern to persuade fits well with a rhetorical background, but the abstraction to a philosophical concern does not.

The discussion above demonstrates that there is discussion in the scholarly literature as to how to best conceive of underlying themes across his treatises. Though this discussion has not progressed very far, it is significant for this thesis that both of the themes so far proposed have implications for Tertullian's hermeneutics. This thesis accepts the proposal of Bray and adapts it as a hermeneutical principle, and also gives credit to Rhee's observations, but prefers to cast it as an underlying rhetorical background rather than a philosophical concern. On the whole, this minor discussion of a unifying theme strengthens the plausibility of this thesis' key presupposition that Tertullian's writings are best read as a whole.

C. The Problem of Divergent Lists of Principles

Many scholars have attempted to summarize Tertullian's hermeneutics, with widely varying conclusions as to how best to state these. There are happy threads of commonality in this discussion,

but a brief perusal demonstrates that there are many different ways to frame Tertullian's overall hermeneutical project. What follows is a perusal of several ways in which scholars have attempted to summarize Tertullian's hermeneutics, in order to contrast this thesis with the secondary literature.

Helen Rhee attempts to state what she sees as Tertullian's primary hermeneutics as follows:

If there are any general principles in Tertullian's use and exegesis of the scripture, they would be his claims that only the genuine Christians, not the heretics, had the right to use and interpret the scripture, which has its internal unity as God's revealed truth, and that the church's *regula fidei* should be the authoritative norm and guide for a correct scriptural interpretation by the Christians.¹⁹⁴

Rhee's statement above draws attention to a common difficulty in articulating Tertullian's hermeneutics and distilling them into a few words. To attempt to summarize one of Rhee's principles into a concise sentence, it might be; *the exclusive rights of genuine Christians to interpret the scriptures in accordance with the rule of faith*. This sounds like a peculiar principle indeed. It means that only a genuine Christian can properly interpret the Scriptures, thus finding a principle within the reader of the Scriptures himself. Nonetheless, Rhee is not alone in saying something like this is operating in the way Tertullian reads the Scriptures. Some scholars feel inclined to include such non-literary components as crucial to Tertullian's handling of the Scriptures alongside his well-recognized emphasis on the rule of faith.

Similar to Rhee's inclusion of non-literary phenomena, Anthony Guerra talks about Tertullian's 'warrants', which is a category of principles which Tertullian argues from in order to justify both his arguments and his exegesis: "Tertullian consistently presents not one but rather five warrants for his faith position: (1) scripture, (2) reason, (3) superior moral behavior, (4) spiritual testimony, and (5) tradition. For Tertullian, these multiple warrants exist in a fluid state and the relative weight assigned to

¹⁹⁴ Rhee, "Tertullian and Paul," 196.

each warrant varies in accord with the author's polemical needs."¹⁹⁵ Guerra's doctrine of 'warrants' is important for the argument in this thesis, as it provides a unique framework to understand the priorities of Tertullian's hermeneutics. One can see in Guerra's third warrant, "superior moral behavior" echoes of Gerald Bray, who views "holiness" as the dominant motif that unifies Tertullian's treatises.

Jean-Claude Fredouille distills Tertullian's hermeneutics to the following: "[T]he importance of historical and literary context, distrust of allegory and predilection for literal meaning, typological exegesis, comprehension and interpretation of detail in the light of the whole."¹⁹⁶ This list is quite different from Rhee's. Fredouille emphasizes simpler literary practices, but nonetheless states that these principles are controlled by something that looms larger for Tertullian, namely, the rule of faith: "But there is a limit that the exegete cannot overcome: the one imposed on him by the *regula fidei*."¹⁹⁷ Fredouille thus restricts Tertullian's hermeneutics to strict literary practices, reserving theological controlling principles like the rule of faith to a category of theological fiat rather than a principle of hermeneutics per se.

Everett Ferguson lists Tertullian's hermeneutics as follows: the meaning of words, taking the whole of scripture into account, appeal to simplicity and clarity, basic literal reading of a text with rules for identifying figurative language, interpreting obscure passages by clear ones, consideration of texts which are limited to time and circumstance, the silence of scripture is prohibitive, and appeals to commands and examples.¹⁹⁸ Other scholars come up with completely different lists to describe Tertullian's hermeneutical projects. These are variously stated, but are nonetheless attempts to describe Tertullian's overall interpretive practices. R. P. C. Hanson "[D]eclares the distinguishing characteristics

¹⁹⁵ Anthony J. Guerra, "Polemical Christianity: Tertullian's Search for Certitude," *The Second Century: a Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 109-123, 109.

¹⁹⁶ Fredouille, *Tertullien et la Conversion de la Culture Antique*, 429. Translation mine.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 429. Translation mine.

¹⁹⁸ Ferguson, "Tertullian," 318.

of Tertullian's exegesis be 'common sense, realism, and restraint'."¹⁹⁹ John F. Jahnsen does not attempt to enumerate Tertullian's principles, but speaks of "aspects (of his hermeneutic) that find expression"²⁰⁰. Jahnsen identifies the following as prominent 'aspects' of Tertullian's hermeneutic: the wholeness and unity of Scripture, Scripture interprets Scripture, The 'simplicitas' of Scripture, what is not specifically permitted is forbidden.

From the diversity of perspectives seen above, we can assume that enumerating Tertullian's principles in a simple list is no easy task. Tertullian is an eclectic writer, and his practices are difficult to articulate in a way that reaches broad agreement. Nonetheless, his principles are evident enough that one is by no means discouraged from making an attempt to describe them. There is a great variety of attempts by scholars to describe what Tertullian is doing, and this thesis will come up with its own list, more or less in conformity to some of the writers above.

The issue here appears to be one of scope. That is, shall our lists of Tertullian's principles be expansive and inclusive of Tertullian's peculiarities, like Rhee's and Guerra's, or shall we restrict ourselves to simple literary practices as Fredouille and Ferguson do?

In general, this thesis prefers the kind of summaries given by scholars such as Rhee and Guerra. That is, summaries of Tertullian's hermeneutics that include non-literary phenomena are preferred over against the summaries of Fredouille or Ferguson, who restrict Tertullian's hermeneutics to more discrete literary categories.

The reason for a broader scope to Tertullian's hermeneutics is this: this thesis wants to give a more comprehensive account of the intellectual tools Tertullian uses to interpret the Scriptures. In

¹⁹⁹ Sider, *Ancient Rhetoric and the Art of Tertullian*, 9.

²⁰⁰ Jahnsen, "Tertullian and the New Testament," 202.

researching what are the operative ideas and practices stated and implied in Tertullian's treatises, a foray into phenomena that goes beyond mere grammar and literary practices cannot be avoided.

Further, the definition of a principle, according to Webster's dictionary, is a "fundamental law, doctrine, or assumption"²⁰¹ or "rule or code of conduct".²⁰² However bizarre or difficult these fundamentals are to state, they should be included in order to give an accurate picture of Tertullian's hermeneutics. Therefore, in asking what principles are operative in his hermeneutics, this thesis is open to including the more peculiar elements of Tertullian's thought.

This is an attempt at maximum comprehensibility in reading Tertullian. It is not just in his hermeneutics, but almost everywhere else, as well, that Tertullian makes connections to a vast array of data and principles. Andrew McGowan, in speaking of Tertullian's handling of the Pauline epistles, describes his reading of Paul as "maximalist": "Tertullian's reading of Paul is maximalist; that is, he regards Paul not as a source whose real meaning must be established through single-minded attention even to the Pauline corpus, but as organically related to a wider set of literature (the whole Biblical Canon) and to the life of the church and its Rule of Faith in particular."²⁰³ How Tertullian reads Paul is how he reads the Scriptures. Tertullian does not merely read Paul as an author, but Paul as connected to a wide array of literature and communities: pagan, Jewish, and Christian. Beyond this, Tertullian reads Paul in relation to the church, and a practice of discipline within the church that stands in contradistinction to the pagan society around him. Since Tertullian is a "maximalist" writer, it seems best to try to capture his hermeneutics in a "maximalist" manner as well, by capturing the breadth of hermeneutic phenomenon that his writings evince.

²⁰¹ Merriam-Webster.com. "Principle," accessed Sep 28 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/principle>.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Andrew McGowan, "Paul, Tertullian, and the Rule of Faith," in *Tertullian and Paul*, 13.

D. Tertullian's Priorities of Rules and Argument

It would be most helpful if Tertullian himself stated anything about his own thinking on exegetical priorities, and this he does in a variety of places, with no small ambiguity as to what these priorities are.

One of his clearly stated rules is that of antiquity: what comes earliest supersedes and is more authoritative than what comes later. "I am accustomed in my prescription against all heresies, to fix my compendious criterion (of truth) in the testimony of time; claiming priority therein as our rule, and alleging lateness to be the characteristic of every heresy."²⁰⁴

In the ninth chapter of *De Prescriptio*, In responding to his interlocutors about their misinterpretation of Jesus' saying "seek and ye shall find", Tertullian articulates "reason"²⁰⁵ as his exegetical foundation: "Let it be granted, that these words, 'Seek, and ye shall find,' were addressed to all men (equally). Yet even here one's aim is carefully to determine the sense of the words consistently with (that reason), which is the guiding principle in all interpretation."²⁰⁶

Another statement of his own priorities is found in *De Corona*; "The argument for Christian practices becomes all the stronger, when also nature, which is the first rule of all, supports them."²⁰⁷ So he has the criterion for truth as time, and the ultimate criterion for interpreting the scripture is reason, and "the first rule of all" is nature.

A special problem arises when in another place, Tertullian includes the Scripture as the foundation of all. His writings give the appearance of two very different approaches to Scripture. In *De Prescriptio*, Tertullian explicitly eschews Scripture as a foundation for his argumentation: "On the

²⁰⁴ Tertullian, *Adv. Marcionem*, 5.19.1. Lat. *Priorem vindicans regulam nostram*.

²⁰⁵ Lat. *Ratio*.

²⁰⁶ Tertullian, *De Prescriptio*, 9.1. Lat. *Interpretationis gubernaculo* is here rendered as "the guiding principle in all interpretation."

²⁰⁷ Tertullian, *De Corona*, 5.1. Lat. *Natura...prima omnium disciplina est*.

present occasion, indeed, our treatise has rather taken up the general position against heresies, (showing that they must) all be refuted on definite, equitable, and necessary rules, without any comparison with the Scriptures.”²⁰⁸ However, in *De Velandis Virginibus*, Tertullian articulates a tri-fold foundation for his argument. It includes Scripture as the foundation for natural law. “Herein consists the defence of our opinion, in accordance with Scripture, in accordance with Nature, in accordance with Discipline. Scripture founds the law, Nature joins to attest it, Discipline exacts it.”²⁰⁹ Ferguson notes that Tertullian uses “nature” and “reason” interchangeably, and that by “discipline“, Tertullian means “ecclesiastical practice.”²¹⁰ Taken this way, what Tertullian is saying here may be a little easier for modern ears to understand: Scripture is the foundation of the rules of conduct, reason verifies those rules, and the church is the centre for the practice and enforcement of those rules. Bray puts it this way: “Scripture is thus the constitutive principle, nature its corroborating witness, and discipline the practical appropriation of the new law.”²¹¹

A cursory reading of the above quotes from Tertullian demonstrates how some scholars come to the conclusion that Tertullian adopts principles as they suit him: “Tertullian has a gift for presenting a *locus communis* adapted *ad hoc* as one of his firm and lasting convictions.”²¹² O’ Malley specifically notes that Tertullian removes a crucial principle when it suits him; “in the heat of controversy, he is much more apt to limit Scripture.”²¹³

This apparent contradiction should not be taken as Ferguson intimates, to mean that Tertullian is adopting whatever principles make for the best argument at the time, as if he personally held to nothing but what would win the current argument. A much better framework for understanding Tertullian is that

²⁰⁸ Tertullian, *De Prescriptio*, 44.13.

²⁰⁹ Tertullian, *De Velandis Virginibus*, 16.1.

²¹⁰ Everett Ferguson, “Tertullian, Scripture, Rule of Faith, and Paul,” in *Tertullian and Paul*, 26.

²¹¹ Jahnsen, “Tertullian and the New Testament,” 199.

²¹² Waszink, “Tertullian’s Principles and Methods of Exegesis,” 26.

²¹³ O’ Malley, *Tertullian and the Bible*, 132.

position taken by Anthony Guerra. Guerra proposes that Tertullian operates with a network of intersecting “warrants”. These warrants are essentially principles, but Guerra rejects the idea that there is an explicit hierarchy among them. Rather, “[T]he various warrants exist for Tertullian in a dynamic state of inner tension, each warrant reacting with all the others. The changes in the interrelationships of these warrants are a function of the particular adversary’s position addressed as well as of Tertullian’s changing mind. These last two factors are intertwined and cannot in any simplistic or definitive manner be isolated from one another.”²¹⁴

Regarding the above two quotes from *De Prescriptio* and *Virginibus Velandis*, it is plain enough that these two quotes are taken from two different works with different audiences, and thus we may see the cause of the using of different warrants as a “foundation”. In *Virginibus Velandis*, Tertullian is addressing a controversy among Christians as to whether Christian women should wear the veil. In this discussion, he claims Scripture founds the natural law. This is a shared assumption between himself and his fellow Christian readers. However, in *De Prescriptio*, we see Tertullian guiding his Christian reader on how to reason with those outside of the church. Here, the arguments must be based on “[D]efinite, equitable, and necessary rules, without any comparison with the Scriptures.”²¹⁵ Tertullian believed Scripture was pre-eminent, as he states in *Virginibus Velandis*. However, this does not mean that Scriptures are the foundation for argumentation with heretics. He may eschew Scripture as a foundation for discussion with heretics without rejecting Scripture as the foundation for moral imperatives like the veiling of virgins, for these are two different kinds of foundations as dictated by the intended audience.

²¹⁴ Guerra, “Polemical Christianity,” 120.

²¹⁵ Tertullian, *De Prescriptio*, 44.13.

This is a good example of Guerra's observation that "The changes in the interrelationships of these warrants are a function of the particular adversary's position..."²¹⁶

To draw a contemporary example, it is no different than contemporary apologists who use natural theology when reasoning with non-Christians, often making very little explicit reference to the Bible. At the same time, when reasoning with their fellow Christians, these apologists will make copious reference to Scriptures to argue for their positions. It would be specious to claim that modern apologists change their opinions about the Bible in the heat of controversy as O' Malley and Waszink imply of Tertullian.

Tertullian is best viewed, not as a rhetorical opportunist, but a writer who adapts his argument strategy based on the audience. For understanding Tertullian's varied emphases in argumentation, it is critical to pay attention to the intended audience of Tertullian's treatises.

With respect to Tertullian's "compendious criterion (of truth) in the testimony of time",²¹⁷ and his "first rule of all"²¹⁸ in nature and finding "the guiding principle in all interpretation"²¹⁹ in reason, it is a little more difficult to establish exactly what is being said here, but an attempt at harmonization will be explored in the next section. Nevertheless, what Tertullian means by "first" and "priority" shows the difficulty in establishing a logical order to Tertullian's hierarchy of principles. However, rather than hastily asserting Tertullian contradicts himself here, Guerra's contention that Tertullian's warrants should not be seen in a strict hierarchy is a promising interpretive tool. There may be multiple senses in which something may be "first" and "the guiding principle."

²¹⁶ Guerra, "Polemical Christianity," 120.

²¹⁷ Tertullian, *Adv. Marcionem*, 5.19.1.

²¹⁸ Tertullian, *De Corona*, 5.1.

²¹⁹ Tertullian, *De Prescriptio*, 9.1.

The above clarification in establishing Tertullian's priorities serves as a suitable introduction to the eight principles of Tertullian's hermeneutics. The above exploration of nature, reason, and truth, coupled with the framework of intersecting warrants provided by Guerra, provides an apophatic introduction that these principles are not minutely defined, nor are they a strict hierarchy.

E. Tertullian's Eight Principles of Hermeneutics

1. The Rule of Reason and Nature

Tertullian devotes a considerable amount of effort to arguments from nature. His longest discussion of nature is found in *De Corona*, where he builds his arguments on the belief that laws stem from nature, of which God is the creator. Tertullian finds exegetical warrant for his appeals to nature, reason, and law, from Paul in 1 Cor 11:14 and Romans 2:14. Commenting on these verses, Tertullian says: "[H]e suggests both natural law and a law-revealing nature."²²⁰ For Tertullian, natural law is a form of revelation, although our perception of this revelation is distorted by demonic forces and "ungodly uses": "[T]he entire creation which has been made over to our race for certain uses, whence the apostle says that it too unwillingly became subject to vanity, completely bereft of its original character, first by vain, then by base, unrighteous, and ungodly uses."²²¹ Tertullian also attributes distortions of this naturally revealed law to demons, which figure prominently as the forces behind the Roman shows; "[A]ll the materials of which shows are got up belong to God, but lack the knowledge to perceive as well that they have all been changed by the devil."²²²

²²⁰ Tertullian, *De Corona*, 6.1.

²²¹ Tertullian, *De Corona*, 6.2.

²²² Tertullian, *De Corona*, 6.3.

In a later work, Tertullian articulates a logical ordering to the relationship of arguments from Scripture and arguments from nature; “Herein consists the defence of our opinion, in accordance with Scripture, in accordance with nature, in accordance with discipline. Scripture founds the law, nature joins to attest it, discipline exacts it.”²²³ If this is to be taken as a clarification of his position, nature fills a “corroborating evidence” relationship to the Scriptures. Yet, Tertullian is at times willing to make stand-alone arguments from nature. For example, in the following important quote, Tertullian claims that the knowledge of God is derived from nature, on the condition that one is acting in accordance with the divine dispensation: “One may no doubt be wise in the things of God, even from one’s natural powers, but only in witness to the truth, not in maintenance of error; (only) when one acts in accordance with, not in opposition to, the divine dispensation. For some things are known even by nature: the immortality of the soul, for instance, is held by many; the knowledge of our God is possessed by all.”²²⁴ Since the knowledge derived from nature is only accurate insofar as one is not maintaining error, and that such knowledge may be distorted by demonic forces and ungodly uses, the Scriptures are needed as an authoritative corrective to these trends.

Arguing that Christian soldiers should not practice the Roman tradition of wearing laurel wreaths, he states; “The argument for Christian practices becomes all the stronger, when also nature, which is the first rule of all, supports them.”²²⁵ How is nature the “first rule of all” when it is Scripture which “founds the law”? One simple answer might be that Tertullian is here thinking of chronology. Nature is chronologically the first rule of all, being the first thing made, and Scripture, being chronologically later, is nevertheless the authoritative foundation for settling disputed matters. Nature

²²³ Tertullian, *De Velandis Virginibus*, 16.1.

²²⁴ Tertullian, *De Resurrectione Carnis*, 3.1.

²²⁵ Tertullian, *De Corona*, 6.1.

is chronologically prior to Scripture, but being subject to distortions by natural reason, it is the authority of Scripture which corrects erroneous reasoning.

Coming to the issue of hermeneutics, this natural law includes natural laws about how to interpret the Scriptures. Tertullian frequently appeals to nature and reason abstracted as principles, and he ties these to rightly interpreting the Scriptures. In responding to his interlocutors about their misinterpretation of Jesus' saying "seek and ye shall find", Tertullian objects that their interpretations are not in accord with reason: "Let it be granted, that these words, 'Seek, and ye shall find,' were addressed to all men (equally). Yet even here one's aim is carefully to determine the sense of the words consistently with (that reason), which is the guiding principle in all interpretation."²²⁶ Similarly, in the same chapter he writes: "[A]void interpreting, 'Seek, and ye shall find,' without regard to the rule of reason."²²⁷

The above exploration of Tertullian's use of reason and nature, especially as it relates to the Scriptures, does indeed clarify these categories. Tertullian's usage of these ideas reveals an internally consistent logic of nature and authority across a fairly diverse sampling of Tertullian's treatises. Put simply, nature and reason are chronologically prior to Scripture, but since they may be distorted, are subject to the authoritative primacy of the Scriptures.

One might imagine a particular objection to this harmonization of Tertullian by pointing to Tertullian's disparaging view of reason whenever it broaches the domain of philosophy. The difficulty arises when comparing Tertullian's use of reason and nature in *De Corona*, *De Velandis Virginibus*, and *De Resurrectione Carnis* as cited above, in contrast to his universally disparaging comments about reason and philosophy in *De Prescriptio*, where he writes;

²²⁶ Tertullian, *De Prescriptio*, 9.1.

²²⁷ Tertullian, *De Prescriptio*, 9.6. Lat. *sine disciplina rationis interpretentur*.

For (philosophy) it is which is the material of the world's wisdom, the rash interpreter of the nature and the dispensation of God...Unhappy Aristotle! Who invented for these men dialectics, that art of building up and pulling down; an art so evasive in its propositions, so far-fetched in its conjectures, so harsh, in its arguments, so productive of contentions-embarrassing even to itself, retracting everything, and really treating of nothing! . . . Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief. For this is our palmary faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides.²²⁸

Given that philosophy is working with the material of nature, which Tertullian envisions in *De Corona* as a law-revealing revelation from God, how can this be consistent with a clear denunciation of attempts by pagans to understand it coherently? In saying “there is nothing which we ought to believe besides” (faith), is not natural revelation essentially relegated to the dust bin of irrelevance, thus being plain evidence that Tertullian’s “First rule of all” is really no rule at all? It appears to be only a mere convenient rhetorical tool for his needs at the moment?

This apparent incongruity is a misinterpretation of Tertullian, for there is nothing overtly inconsistent going on between his statements in *De Corona*, *Viginibus Velandis*, *De Resurrectione Carnis* and *De Prescriptioe*. Tertullian states plainly that the revelation from nature is “subject to vanity”, a point he takes from Paul. There is no inconsistency in making an argument from the right use of reason while in another work, decrying how pagan philosophy distorts that reason. In *De Prescriptio*, “What he is really arguing is the use of reason in a ‘reasonable’ fashion, so that it does not lose its bearings and arrive at senseless conclusions.”²²⁹ Gonzales articulates a system by means of which to understand Tertullian’s priority of reason as it relates to his other major principle of his, the rule of faith.

To him, then, the question is not one of reason versus faith as sources of authority but is rather a question of two different sorts of reason. One is the reason of “Athens”; the

²²⁸ Tertullian, *De Prescriptio*, 7.2, 5-13.

²²⁹ Gonzalez, “Athens and Jerusalem Revisited,” 22.

other is the reason of “Jerusalem.” One could be called “dialectical reason”; the other would then be “historical reason.” The former turns to itself, and achieves nothing because it is applied to and ruled by nothing but itself. The latter turns to given facts-in this case, the historical “disciplina” of Jesus, as summarized in the “rule of faith”- and arrives at conclusions on the basis of such facts. Dialectical reason asks whether or not God can do a certain thing; historical reason asks whether or not he in fact has done it, and then applies itself to that given fact.²³⁰

Gonzalez gives the label of “dialectical reasoning” to a distorted use of natural law which Tertullian so forcefully denounces. Reason itself in Tertullian’s thought, is simply subject to distortion, and his forceful denunciations of dialectical reason should not lead to the conclusion that Tertullian disparages reason itself,²³¹ which he plainly advocated as a source of authority.

Interestingly though, he suggests that the purest expression of natural law would be in the historical teachings of Jesus, of which the rule of faith is the most succinct expression. In this sense, the rule of faith, which will be the next rule to be discussed, is itself the purest distillation of the law of nature.

2. The Rule of Faith

Tertullian laid great importance on “The Rule of Faith” -a structured though malleable statement of essential doctrine that serves as a rule by which Scriptural interpretation is to be measured. It is a principle that sets the parameters for Christian discourse and draws a line for when orthodoxy ends and freedom of opinion begins. “This law of faith being constant, the other succeeding points of

²³⁰ Gonzalez, “Athens and Jerusalem Revisited,” 22.

²³¹ Compare this with Etienne Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (New York, NY: Charles’ Scribner’s Sons, 1938), 10-11, who casts anti-rational theology as belonging to the “Tertullian Family” for its dismissal of the authority of reason.

discipline and conversation admit the novelty of correction; the grace of God, to wit, operating and advancing even to the end.”²³²

Commenting on Tertullian’s arguments in *De Prescriptione*, Gerald Bray remarks: “Much of Tertullian’s argument concerns the interpretation of Scripture, which he insists must be read as an organic whole within the context^[P]_[SEP] of the Rule of Faith.”²³³ It is not a mere personal nor corporate creed for catechetical or liturgical purposes, but is a tool for rightly interpreting the Scriptures.

A very clear statement on the use of the rule of faith is found in *De Pudicitia*, where, in objecting to his opponents’ use of parables as sources of doctrine, Tertullian says: “From the beginning they have fashioned the very substance of their doctrine to agree with the details of the parables. Of course, since they are not bound by the rule of faith, they are free to hunt up and piece together things which seem to be typified by the parable. We, however, do not fashion doctrines using the parables as raw materials, but rather, we interpret the parables on the basis of our doctrines.”²³⁴

Some scholars²³⁵ argue that Tertullian saw the rule of faith as preeminent, and that in his mind, it was a creedal statement to which Scripture must conform. In this sense, the rule of faith is said to be Tertullian’s ultimate authority. For example, Ferguson states: “[T]he ‘rule’ functioned for Tertullian as the first principles did in platonic and stoic philosophy – the foundational ideas, undemonstrable themselves but the ‘givens’ that are the basis of all reasoning.”²³⁶ O’Malley thinks Tertullian’s view of the rule of faith is so exalted that “Tertullian has taken a long step towards making the Scripture irrelevant”²³⁷ G.T. Armstrong notes the exegetical importance of the rule of faith, calling it “the

²³² Tertullian, *De Velandis Virginibus*, 1.5.

²³³ Bray, *Holiness and the Will of God*, 7.

²³⁴ Tertullian, *De Pudicitia*, 8.12-9.1.

²³⁵ Rhee, “Tertullian and Paul,” 196; Fredouille, *Tertullien et la Conversion de la Culture Antique*, 429.

²³⁶ Ferguson, “Tertullian,” 319.

²³⁷ Waszink, “Tertullian’s Principles and Methods of Exegesis,” 24.

fundamental principle of his hermeneutic.”²³⁸ Fredouille sees the importance of things like the rule of faith for Tertullian’s exegesis, but does not view it as a component of Tertullian’s hermeneutics *per se*. Guerra on the other hand, would see the importance of the rule of faith, but classifies it as a subset of ‘tradition’, which is a tool in Tertullian’s intersecting ‘warrants’. So there is a wide range of opinion about the relationship of the *regula* to Tertullian’s hermeneutics. This thesis’ position is closest to Guerra’s, though placing the *regula* as a subset of a warrant does not seem to give the *regula* the prominence in Tertullian’s thinking it deserves.

While it won’t do to understate the importance of the rule of faith for Tertullian’s hermeneutics, a simple hierarchy with the rule of faith at the top does not give an accurate account of Tertullian’s *loci* of authority as O’ Malley and to a lesser extent, Armstrong, among others, portray it. As we have seen in our discussion of Tertullian’s concept of nature and reason, Tertullian is perfectly willing to grant nature as a source of revelation, and reason as our steadfast guide through life and texts. Were it the case that the rule of faith was so important as to “make the scripture irrelevant”, we would not see such copious arguments from nature, history, and Scripture across his treatises.

If the rule of faith is not to be seen as the apex of a hierarchy of authority, what was its function for Tertullian? Gerald Bray suggests that Tertullian understood the rule of faith like a Roman jurist: “He quotes the jurist Paul²³⁹: ‘A *regula* is that which explains briefly what the matter is. The law must be deduced from the *regula*, but the *regula* is determined by what the law is,’ and concludes, ‘The *regula fidei* was the summary of the *lex* (i.e. Scripture) which could then be used as the fundamental rule in Biblical interpretation”²⁴⁰ In other words, if Tertullian is using the term *regula* as Paul the jurist uses it in Roman law, then the rule of faith is not a rule that stands outside of Scripture, but is itself a summary

²³⁸ Waszink, “Tertullian’s Principles and Methods of Exegesis,” 24.

²³⁹ Julius Paulus Prudentissimus, a Roman jurist of the 2nd and 3rd century.

²⁴⁰ Bray, *Holiness and the Will of God*, 103.

of Scripture. If “the *regula* is determined by what the law is”, then the *regula fidei* is determined by the contents of Scripture, and is itself seen as a summary of the Scriptures.

Citing Eric Osborn, Ferguson describes the relationship of the rule to the Scriptures: “Osborn is more accurate in saying that one of Tertullian’s moves in exegesis is to find Scripture concentrated in the Rule of Faith, which is dependent on Scripture.”²⁴¹ This view of the *regula* as a concentration of Scripture has some scholars arguing that it should not be seen as a “principle” that guides the interpretation of Scripture, since the *regula* itself is a summary of the Scriptures.

Compiling citations from Flessman Van Leer, Ferguson writes; “‘Scripture in its entirety expresses the *regula*’; the *regula* is not ‘a formal principle outside of scripture, but the purport, intention of scripture itself’; while affirming that ‘scripture has to be explained according to the *regula*,’ she adds that for Tertullian ‘it is entirely impossible to place the *regula* in any way above scripture.’”²⁴² This is because for Tertullian, the rule of faith is not of his own making, as though it summarizes the Scripture based on good application of hermeneutic rules found outside of Scripture. As Waszink articulates, the rule of faith came from Jesus himself, and is the Lord’s own summary of the Scriptures. “This *regula* is of the greatest significance for Tertullian. For him there can be no question that it has been handed down whole and *entire* from Jesus himself as a simple, unified, definite and determined corpus of doctrine.”²⁴³

A further distinction to be made is that though the *regula* is a summary of Scripture, the *regula* is not itself a revelation from God: “Though the Rule of Faith is the last and highest instance of the correct knowledge of Divine Revelation and consequently of the legitimate meaning of Holy Scripture,

²⁴¹ Ferguson, “Tertullian, scripture, Rule of Faith, and Paul,” in *Tertullian and Paul*, 30.

²⁴² Ellen Flessman-Van Leer, *Tradition and Scripture in the Early Church* (Amsterdam, NL, Van Gorcum, 1953), 178, 194, 180. Quoted in Ferguson, “Tertullian, Scripture, Rule of Faith, and Paul,” 30, fn. 43.

²⁴³ Robert B. Eno. “Ecclesia Docens: Structures of Doctrinal Authority in Tertullian and Vincent,” *Thomist: a speculative quarterly review* 40, no.1 (Jan 1976): 96-115, 103.

the Scripture remains the source of the Revelation.”²⁴⁴ In this regard, Waszink here makes an important observation about Tertullian’s use of the *regula*. He points out that the *regula* is quite limited in its applications, providing “[A] norm for a correct and legitimate interpretation of Holy Scripture only with respect to the true statements, the *veritates*, of Biblical revelation which are contained in the Rule.”²⁴⁵ Beyond this, the rule of faith is mute, and so other principles are needed for which “[T]he real exegetical work begins for Tertullian.”²⁴⁶ Tertullian certainly does this work, and articulates other principles, which is a large part of why this thesis regards it as inaccurate to regard Tertullian’s use of the *regula* as an all-encompassing key for interpreting the Scriptures. If it is true that he views the *regula* as a summary of Scripture, then Tertullian’s statement that “we interpret the parables on the basis of our doctrines”²⁴⁷ should not be understood as a statement that the *regula* is a source of authority that sits outside of Scripture and judges it as a preeminent principle. Rather, the *regula* should be read as a synonym for “we interpret the particular Scriptures on the basis of the whole of scripture.”

This reading of Tertullian is, of course, contestable. Albeit, it is also an effective attempt to express a harmonization of Tertullian’s thought that is frequently dismissed as ‘unsystematic rhetoric.’ This thesis concedes that if we are to introduce Tertullian’s hermeneutics to the lay reader with a few simple points, it may be best to summarize the rule of faith as the apex of Tertullian’s hermeneutics. However, in seeking a fuller and more accurate description, this does not represent Tertullian’s hermeneutic set of tools very well.

²⁴⁴ Waszink, “Tertullian’s Principles and Methods of Exegesis,” 26.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 26.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 26.

²⁴⁷ Tertullian, *De Pudicitia*, 8.12-9.1.

3. The Rule of Progressive Revelation

a. Stoic and Biblical Influences

One of the distinctive features of Tertullian's approach to hermeneutics is his perspective on the progress of revelation, in that it affects how he foresees the ongoing task of biblical interpretation by the church. The idea of progress features so prominently in Tertullian's work that the "[N]otion of progress is, moreover, an idea dear to Tertullian, for it is found elsewhere in his work, applied to the whole of civilization."²⁴⁸ Kauffman notes how several prominent scholars have concluded that Tertullian 'idealized' the progress of revelation, and attributes this fixation to a lifelong study of Stoicism.²⁴⁹ Fredouille argues that Tertullian exhibits the historical consciousness of Roman thought. "Thus his polemic...led Tertullian to concretely reflect on what we are obliged to call 'the meaning of history' - one of the oldest and most characteristic frameworks, certainly, of Roman thought."²⁵⁰ Fredouille regards Tertullian's view of history as a carefully crafted synthesis of Christian and Stoic categories of thought, with influence stemming from Justin Martyr and Irenaeus.²⁵¹

The Stoic connection is difficult to demonstrate, as no explicit Stoic historiography is extant, although scholars of the Stoic tradition have long recognized that Stoicism does have a distinctive outlook on history. As Colish writes:

A historian imbued with Stoicism would have a decidedly metahistorical outlook, reflecting a physics in which change is the paramount reality and in which the deity is identical with the material world. Historical phenomena, no less than natural phenomena, would therefore be viewed as manifestations of the immanent divine logos, at the same time a benevolent providential force and the rational yet ineluctable cause of historical events. This divine logos ruling history from within would...be governed by a

²⁴⁸ Fredouille, *Tertullien et la Conversion de la Culture Antique*, 246. Translation mine.

²⁴⁹ Kaufman, "Tertullian on Heresy, History, and the Reappropriation of Revelation," 176.

²⁵⁰ Fredouille, *Tertullien et la Conversion de la Culture Antique*, 253-4. Translation mine.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 256.

cyclical pattern of disintegration, and reintegration. Just as the cosmos and its natural laws are, so history would be understood as a temporal extension without limits, a continuous process of cyclical change in which all stages are equally perfect because they are equally identified with the divine logos.²⁵²

Fredouille still sees “Roman thought”, particularly Stoic biological categories, as the root of Tertullian’s thought on historical development.²⁵³ This is difficult to demonstrate conclusively, for although the similarities are evident, Tertullian never makes an explicit Stoic reference to the origin of his ideas, and explicitly rejects any attempts at a Stoic-Christian synthesis. Rather, Tertullian gives an exegetical account of his theology of history, rooted in the parable of the grain of mustard in the fourth chapter of Mark. While parallels may be found with the “Roman thought” in which he was doubtlessly steeped, it is far easier to demonstrate and restate Tertullian’s own stated justification for his doctrine as rooted in the Scriptures. There are crucial differences between a Stoic understanding of history and Tertullian’s. Tertullian exhibits no sympathies with a cyclical view of history, nor is “perfection” a quality of the present at all times: “To what faith do these notable facts bear witness, if not to that which ought to inspire in us the belief that they are proofs and documents of our own future integrity and perfect resurrection?...We have then already settled the principle that the dispensation of the future state ought not to be compared with that of the present world.”²⁵⁴ Rather, God in his providence, is working in history to bring about a perfect resurrection at a future date. Moreover, God is not strictly immanent in history but transcendent over it and is by no means to be confused with the creation itself: “We give offence by proclaiming that there is one God...from whom all things comes, and who is Lord of the whole universe.”²⁵⁵

²⁵² Colish, *The Stoic Tradition From Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, 291.

²⁵³ Fredouille, *Tertullien et la Conversion de la Culture Antique*, 290. Translation mine.

²⁵⁴ Tertullian, *De Resurrectione Carnis*, 58.9; 60.4.

²⁵⁵ Tertullian, *De Testimonio Animae*, 2.1.

Another important distinction between Tertullian and Stoicism's doctrine of progress in history is the role of the Holy Spirit, whom Tertullian sees as the cause of progress. For Tertullian, the Holy Spirit has been working with God's people through the ages. The Holy Spirit has been graciously teaching a group of people throughout history through varied dispensations of revelation. This is distinct from the Stoic concept of progress by the individual exercising their will to form disciplined habits of the soul. "Tertullian underlines the action of the Spirit in the practice of the virtue of patience...This is Tertullian's New Testament theology of the virtues, wherein the Spirit is the agent of the divine energies infused in the Christian."²⁵⁶ This fixation on the progress of virtue forms the structure around how Tertullian interprets the Scriptures, and is a crucial component of Tertullian's soteriology.

These are big differences, and so other than a loosely defined preference for the 'biological analogy' of Mark's mustard grain parable, Fredouille's contention that Tertullian's thought is rooted in Stoic categories is a difficult one to defend. Perhaps the similarity with Stoicism is more about the dissimilarity between Christianity and other modes of thinking popular in the Roman world at the time, especially Epicureanism and Platonism. In this respect, Tertullian and the Stoics share an idea of a deity working within history that his other contemporaries did not. Of the pagan thought popular during Tertullian's time, his own theology more closely resembles Stoicism than Epicureanism or Platonism. However, this does not establish much of a connection in the inspiration of his ideas, which likely originate from Tertullian's interpretation of the Scriptures, more than any other source.

²⁵⁶ Fredouille, *Tertullien et la Conversion de la Culture Antique*, 394. Translation mine.

b. Tertullian's Framework of Progress

Tertullian's basic view of history is that God is continually in the process of bringing his people into greater conformity to his will. This is conceived primarily in moral terms, as God conforms his people to His own holiness. For Tertullian, history is about the history of salvation. This moral process is done by means of God putting his people under various administrations of discipline, with varied prophetic and apostolic administrators, empowered by the Holy Spirit. "[S]ince human mediocrity was unable to take in all things at once, discipline should, little by little, be directed, and ordained, and carried on to perfection, by that Vicar of the Lord, the Holy Spirit...What, then, is the Paraclete's administrative office but this, the direction of discipline, the revelation of the Scriptures, the reformation of the intellect, the advancement toward the 'better things?'"²⁵⁷ Nothing is without stages of growth: all things await their season."²⁵⁷ This growth is compared to the growth of a man from birth to maturity in four stages.

Tertullian's doctrine of the progress of revelation is exegetically defended by the use of Mark 4:28, the parable of the grain of mustard. Commenting on this text he says the following: "So too, righteousness -for the God of righteousness and of creation is the same- was first in a rudimentary state, having a natural fear of God: from that stage it advanced, through the Law and the Prophets, to infancy; from that stage it passed, through the Gospel, to the fervour of youth: now, through the Paraclete, it is settling into maturity."²⁵⁸ Interpreting the Scriptures through the lens of historical dispensations is nothing peculiar to Tertullian. His distinctive is his narrative about the purpose of God in varying his revelation from beginnings to the present, which is increasing instruction of discipline.

²⁵⁷ Tertullian, *De Velandis Virginibus*, 1.6-8.

²⁵⁸ Tertullian, *De Velandis Virginibus*, 1.10.

c. The Current Age of the Paraclete

Tertullian's most peculiar doctrine in all this is his understanding of the age of the Paraclete. This is the stage of maturity in his grain analogy, and is an age that extends the work of the Holy Spirit, where discipline is perfected beyond what is seen in the texts of the New Testament. The New Testament is an age of youth, but not maturity. The apex of Tertullian's doctrine of the progress of revelation is the current age, as demonstrated by the giving of the Paraclete. "Tertullian's mature...eschatology may be summarized as follows: God's dealing with humanity is based on a number of 'eras' (or 'dispensations'). The most recent of these is the 'age of the Paraclete.'"²⁵⁹

In contrast to ages past, the new age is characterized by the gift of knowledge. "The Spirit furnished those who entered the new age with gifts, above all the gift of knowledge, a knowledge that was not, however, in conflict with ordinary human knowledge insofar as normal human knowledge had not been distorted by the prejudices of the former age."²⁶⁰ This knowledge works towards the end of revealing God's perfect will: "This current era is the period of time when, through the visions and sayings of the New Prophecy, the Holy Spirit (Paraclete) has finally revealed to Christians exactly what is expected of them to live strictly in accordance with God's highest requirements."²⁶¹

This means that the teaching of the Paraclete also has the authority to revise and expand on New Testament commands. This is based on a historical development, with the giving of the Paraclete being a new era. In the following quote, Tertullian derides his opponents for accepting the doctrine of second marriage, which was the practice of remarrying after one's spouse dies. Tertullian taught that this was not acceptable in the current age: "'Hardness of heart' reigned until Christ's time; let 'infirmity of the flesh' be content to have reigned until the time of the Paraclete. The new law abrogated divorce-it had

²⁵⁹ William Tabernee, "The World to Come: Tertullian's Christian Eschatology," in *Tertullian and Paul*, 276.

²⁶⁰ Sider, "Literary Artifice and the Figure of Paul in the Writings of Tertullian," 119.

²⁶¹ Tabernee, "The World to Come," 276.

somewhat to abrogate; the new prophecy abrogates second marriage, which is no less a divorce of the former marriage.”²⁶² The new law is the gospel, and the new prophecy is the age of the Spirit.

This age of the Paraclete is not merely an age of renewed knowledge, it is also one wherein the Paraclete grants powers of self-control heretofore unavailable to mankind: “The time for its indulgence was the interval until the Paraclete began his operations, to whose coming were deferred by the Lord the things which in his day ‘could not be endured;’ which it is now no longer competent for any one to be unable to endure, seeing that he through whom the power of enduring is granted is not wanting.”²⁶³

Thus, Tertullian sometimes handles the New Testament the same way he handles the Old Testament. That is, he finds himself defending practices that clearly went above and beyond the practices on display in the New Testament, and he explained this incongruity on account of a church that was yet to develop into maturity. Some New Testament practices stand in discontinuity with the Old Testament, and this is explained in terms of the New Testament being an improvement on the old, a progression in holiness. In the same way, some of Tertullian’s teachings, like banning second marriage, are defended on the basis of being progress in holiness over those immature practices permitted in the New Testament. Tertullian sees some precedent for this principle in the New Testament itself, when Paul speaks of feeding the congregation “with milk.” (1 Cor 3:2) “What was the subject matter which led the apostles to write such words? The inexperience of a new and just rising church, which he was rearing, to wit, ‘with milk,’ not yet with the ‘solid food’ of stronger doctrine; inexperience so great, that that infancy of faith prevented them from yet knowing what they were to do in regard of carnal and sexual necessity.”²⁶⁴

²⁶² Tertullian, *De Monogamia*, 14.5.

²⁶³ Tertullian, *De Monogamia*, 14.7.

²⁶⁴ Tertullian, *De Monogamia*, 11.9.

d. An Example: Food issues

The Scripture's evolving teaching about food consumption is a good example of Tertullian's use of revelatory progress to explain the Biblical text. After the flood, God permitted man to eat meat (Gen 9:3). This is because God saw that man was not able to abstain from eating a single fruit. If man could not do this simple task, it would be futile to expect him to abstain from meat. God's intent behind opening up the panoply of man's diet was that having more liberty to eat of whatever might please him should aid to strengthen his self-control: "It was not suitable for man to be burdened with any further special law of abstinence, who so recently showed himself unable to tolerate so light an interdiction-of one single fruit, to wit; that, accordingly, having the rein relaxed, he was to be strengthened by his very liberty."²⁶⁵ Later, under the law and prophets, God would re-institute restrictions on diet. Tertullian regarded the Old Testament fasts from certain foods as preparatory for the age of the Spirit, where fasting was more often, and more all-inclusive: "...Certain things being prohibited as unclean, in order that man, by observing a perpetual abstinence in certain particulars, might at last the more easily tolerate absolute fasts."²⁶⁶

These absolute fasts were the fasts of the Age of the Spirit, where Tertullian defends the practice of frequent fasts within the church: "... Rather, by the virtue of condemning food he was initiating 'the new man' into 'a severe handling' of 'the old,' that he might show that new man to the devil, again seeking to tempt him by means of food, to be too strong for the whole power of hunger."²⁶⁷

We see here that Tertullian understands the Scriptures as a whole, and in dealing with themes such as food and fasting, he harmonizes the teachings of the Scriptures through a concept of progressive education in discipline. "Tertullian thus underlined the close link which united, with his

²⁶⁵ Tertullian, *De Jejuniiis*, 4.3.

²⁶⁶ Tertullian, *De Jejuniiis*, 5.1.

²⁶⁷ Tertullian, *De Jejuniiis*, 8.2.

theology of history, the exegetical method which he implemented.”²⁶⁸ This method of interpreting the Scriptures surfaces frequently in Tertullian’s debates with Marcion, where he defends the Old Testament as consistent with the New by means of this doctrine of the development of discipline. The age of the Paraclete is not an age of arbitrary revision of Old Testament commands, but is a progress towards the salvation of man.

e. The Problem of the Old and the New

Tertullian’s doctrine of progress appears to involve him in a problem. He frequently appeals to the authority of the ancient in order to establish his arguments. He remarks: “[T]he lateness of date...marks all heresies...In this principle also we must henceforth find a presumption of equal force against all heresies whatsoever-that whatever is first is true, whereas that is spurious which is later in date.”²⁶⁹ This argument is crucial in his reasoning against the pagans, where Moses must antedate Greek thought, which is a corruption of earlier wisdom: “If you happen to have heard of a certain Moses, I speak first of him: he is as far back as the Argive Inachus; by nearly four hundred years...he precedes Danaus, your most ancient name; while he antedates by a millennium the death of Priam. I might affirm too, that he is five hundred years earlier than Homer...”²⁷⁰

Likewise, this argument is crucial when Tertullian deals with his criteria for truth being found in the oldest churches established by the apostles. In establishing the churches, it is the earliest churches which get the benefit of the doubt, and later additions and modifications are what is noted to be heresy: “[A]ll doctrine which agrees with the apostolic churches -those moulds and original sources of the faith must be reckoned for truth, as undoubtedly containing that which the (said) churches received from the

²⁶⁸ Fredouille, *Tertullien et la Conversion de la Culture Antique*, 141-2. Translation mine.

²⁶⁹ Tertullian, *Adv. Praxaeus*, 2.2-3.

²⁷⁰ Tertullian, *De Apologeticus pro Christianus*, 19.3.

apostles, the apostles from Christ, Christ from God...We hold communion with the apostolic churches because our doctrine is in no respect different from theirs. This is our witness of truth.”²⁷¹

Tertullian changes his tune however, when developments are in favour of his theological preferences: “But in all cases it is the later things which have conclusive force, and the subsequent which prevail over the antecedent.”²⁷² Thus, not a few scholars have recognized that ‘the old and the new’ appears to constitute a serious problem in Tertullian’s thought.²⁷³

Fredouille attempts to resolve this difficulty by showing that Tertullian’s ‘new’ grows out of, and is consistent with the old.²⁷⁴ The problem, then, is when ‘new’ is so entirely different from the old that it cannot be shown to have been reasonably built on the old, but is instead an innovation. In Tertullian’s view, innovation is what constitutes heresy.²⁷⁵ He argues that his own innovations are not contradictions of the old by appealing to the ‘newness’ of the age of the Paraclete. Meanwhile, he denounces his opponents by showing their doctrines are innovations that did not organically grow out of the old as he claims that his do: “For the abolition of the ancient law we fully admit, and hold that it actually proceeds from the dispensation of the Creator, -a point which we have already often treated in the course of our discussion, when we showed that the innovation was foretold by the prophets of our God.”²⁷⁶ He understood that the New Testament codes of conduct were “Realized in Christ, but rooted in the ancient Law and announced long ago by the prophets. He rehabilitated the Old Testament and insisted on the continuity which united it in the New, without rupture of unity or development, in the

²⁷¹ Tertullian, *De Prescriptio*, 21.5-7.

²⁷² Tertullian, *De Baptismo*, 13.1.

²⁷³ Sider, “Approaches to Tertullian,” 233.

²⁷⁴ Fredouille, *Tertullien et la Conversion de la Culture Antique*, 293. Translation mine.

²⁷⁵ Tertullian, *De Jejunio*, 13.1.

²⁷⁶ Tertullian, *Adv. Marcionem*, 5.2.1.

image of the fruit of the primitive seed, of which it is the progressive end, but which he remains organically bound.”²⁷⁷

In his own words, the connection between the ever-changing commands of God (especially regarding food) is the development of discipline: “This rationale was constantly kept in the eye of the providence of God -modulating all things, as he does, to suit the exigencies of the times.”²⁷⁸ Tertullian articulates this reasoning as follows: “The rationale has been this, that by a renewed interdiction of food and observation of precept the primordial sin might now be expiated, in order that man may make God satisfaction through the self-same causative material through which he had offended, that is, through interdiction of food; and thus, in emulous wise, hunger might rekindle, just as satiety had extinguished, salvation.”²⁷⁹ The law of God was fully given in paradise, “For the primordial law was given to Adam and Eve in Paradise, as the womb of all the precepts of God.”²⁸⁰ and this will be restored by Christ in the age of the Paraclete. In the interim, the God who gives the law has the authority to reform the precepts of the law in order to suit the times: “[L]et us not annul this power which God has, which reforms the law’s precepts answerably to the circumstances of the times, with a view to man’s salvation.”²⁸¹

For Tertullian, the latest age is a restoration of that which was lost in the first age.

[J]ust as Alpha rolls on till it reaches Omega, and again Omega rolls back until it reaches Alpha, in the same way He might show that in Himself is both the downward course of the beginning on to the end, and the backward course of the end up to the beginning; so that every economy, ending in Him through whom it began -through the Word of God, that is, who was made flesh, -may have an end correspondent to its beginning. And so truly in Christ are all things recalled to ‘the beginning,’ that even faith returns from

²⁷⁷ Fredouille, *Tertullien et la Conversion de la Culture Antique*, 289. Translation mine.

²⁷⁸ Tertullian, *De Jejuniis*, 4.1.

²⁷⁹ Tertullian, *De Jejuniis*, 3.4.

²⁸⁰ Tertullian, *Adv. Judaeos*, 2.2.

²⁸¹ Tertullian, *Adv. Judaeos*, 2.10.

circumcision to the integrity of that (original) flesh...and lastly, the whole man into Paradise, where he was 'from the beginning.'²⁸²

Tertullian's appeals to the ancient and the most recent dispensation does appear to make internal sense when regarded as a whole. He may appeal to the ancient as the source of truth, because the older the source, the closer to Paradise it was. The end of all history is the restoration of Paradise, to which the age of the Paraclete is closest. Thus, the newest dispensation may lay claim to triumphing over whatever preceded it, because it is the closest to the most Ancient. Viewed this way, the problem of 'the old and the new' may well make sense in Tertullian's mind. A contemporary reader however, may be excused for thinking that Tertullian appears to use arguments from the ancient or from the new as conveniences him. If the above reading is correct, he did not take pains to make his overall position as clear as he could have. It may likewise be said that the problem of 'the old and the new' is not strictly a problem for Tertullian per se, because in his view of history, the new is a restoration of the old. Daniélou considers this historical mode of thinking to be one of the most prominent features of Tertullian's thought: "What he does, in other words, is to use a historical rather than a logical argument to connect the faith of Christians in his own period to the principle and foundation of that faith."²⁸³

Whatever one makes of the arguments he employed, for the purpose of this thesis it can be said that Tertullian articulated a doctrine of progress that formed a framework by which to interpret the Scriptures, and this can be profitably conceived as a hermeneutic rule. For him, where one sits in the history of salvation determines how one should interpret a given command in the Scriptures as the people of God work towards a restoration of the primordial law given in Paradise.

²⁸² Tertullian, *De Monogamia*, 5.3-4.

²⁸³ Daniélou, *A History of Early Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicea*, 181.

4. The Rule of Discipline

Having seen the importance of the progress of history and revelation for Tertullian, it is worth considering whether discipline itself may be considered a component of his hermeneutics. For Tertullian, the moral rectitude of an action functions as a principle on how to interpret passages in Scripture and to settle interpretive disputes among Christians.

a. The Meaning of Discipline

Ferguson clarifies Tertullian's use of the word discipline: "Discipline was Tertullian's word for practical precepts. He derived his rules for conduct from Scripture, nature or reason, and discipline, that is ecclesiastical teaching"²⁸⁴ Thus for Ferguson, 'practical precepts' and 'ecclesiastical teaching' are synonymous with what this thesis wants to identify as a component in Tertullian's hermeneutics.

Tertullian often connects particulars to broad generalities, and thus when speaking of ethical particulars, these are never far removed from the way he thinks about larger categories such as virtue. Speaking of the virtue of patience, Tertullian describes the conduct of patience in terms of the broader category of discipline: "This is the rule, this the discipline, these the works of patience which is heavenly and true; that is, of Christian patience..."²⁸⁵

b. Discipline is an Index of Doctrine

The reason for classifying Tertullian's 'discipline' as a tool of hermeneutics is because of the emphasis he puts on how discipline is a guide to doctrine: "In their discipline we have an index of their

²⁸⁴ Everett Ferguson, "Tertullian," *The Expository Times* 120, no. 7 (March 2009): 313-321, 318.

²⁸⁵ Tertullian, *De Patientia*, 16.1.

doctrine.”²⁸⁶ For Tertullian, the lives of the heretics forms a kind of proof that their doctrine, and thereby their exegesis, is false: “I must not omit an account of the conduct also of the heretics -how frivolous it is, how worldly, how merely human, without seriousness, without authority, without discipline, as suits their creed.”²⁸⁷ At the same time, correct Christian living is seen as an evidence of where proper exegesis will be found.

The principle of doctrine being an index of discipline is a happy point of consensus among Tertullian scholars. Discipline is so important for Tertullian that Fredouille writes: “This idea is implicit in all of Tertullian’s treatises addressing moral problems.”²⁸⁸ Indeed, Bray sees all of Tertullian’s writings and theology born of “fundamentally ethical concerns.”²⁸⁹ Guerra lists “superior moral behaviour” as third in his list of Tertullian’s “warrants” for reasoning, and Ferguson relates how this concern over practical ethical matters is fundamental to much of Tertullian’s writing, especially in regard to Biblical interpretation:²⁹⁰ “Tertullian’s discussions of Christian practice involved considerable debate over Biblical interpretation and the relation of Scripture and custom (or tradition). His writings give numerous glimpses into the intramural controversies among Christians about the meaning of Scripture on matters of doctrine and on its application to conduct.”²⁹¹

We have seen earlier that Tertullian regards exegesis as a moral project: “We are as much bound to keep the sense of the Lord as his precepts. Transgression in interpretation is not lighter than in conversation.”²⁹² We have also noted that the lives of apostles and prophets serve as moral exemplars, and these exemplars serve as guides for how to read the instructions of the Scriptures correctly.

²⁸⁶ Tertullian, *De Prescriptio*, 43.2.

²⁸⁷ Tertullian, *De Prescriptio*, 41.1.

²⁸⁸ Fredouille, *Tertullien et la Conversion de la Culture Antique*, 310. Translation mine.

²⁸⁹ Sider, “Approaches to Tertullian,” 255.

²⁹⁰ Guerra, “Polemical Christianity: Tertullian’s Search for Certitude,” 109.

²⁹¹ Ferguson, “Tertullian,” 318.

²⁹² Tertullian, *De Pudicitia*, 9.22.

Coupled together, it is easy to see how Tertullian views well-regulated discipline as a key principle that both allows the Christian to understand the Scriptures correctly, and confirms that he has understood it correctly.

This all-pervading emphasis on discipline means that Tertullian can reliably be expected to interpret the Scriptures in the most demanding, exacting, and ascetically rigorous way possible. Are Christians permitted to flee during persecution? Certainly not! Are women required to wear the veil? Of course! In fact, Christians are being out-done by Arabs, whose women veil their entire faces: “Arabia’s heathen females will be your judges, who cover not only the head, but the face also, so entirely, that they are content, with one eye free, to enjoy rather half the light than to prostitute the entire face.”²⁹³ Can a Christian soldier, victorious in combat, wear a laurel wreath? No, for his only crown is Christ’s. Can a Christian re-marry after their spouse dies? Of course not, and Tertullian wrote two volumes to his own wife not to re-marry in the event of his death, as if to make his point in no uncertain terms. How many fasts should Christians partake in? More! And how about those who depart from these rules of discipline? Well, they should not be regarded as Christians anyways.²⁹⁴

c. Discipline is Historically Conditioned

As comical as Tertullian’s exegetical outcomes may be at times, it is not that Tertullian simplistically stakes out the most morally rigorous exegetical hill on which to die. Rather, discipline is something Tertullian thinks of in a historical framework, as the discipline God requires becomes increasingly strict over time. This element of progress is crucial to Tertullian’s historical reasoning about discipline, as seen in Tertullian’s work *De Spectaculis*: “He does not merely prove,

²⁹³ Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, 17.4.

²⁹⁴ Tertullian, *The Apology*, 46.17.

propositionally, that the shows are evil; he paints a verbal picture of the history and nature of human perversity. Nor for the Christian does he marshal a simple list of injunctions and commands: by the skilful play of scriptural allusion upon scenes recollected from the Shows, he evokes a compelling image of the nature of Christian life and growth.”²⁹⁵

This principle takes on various nuances as history progresses, so that the discipline of one era leads to further discipline in the next era. This starts with the Old Testament, and culminates in Tertullian’s contemporary time, the age of the Paraclete: “Whereas the reason why the Lord sent the Paraclete was, that, since human mediocrity was unable to take in all things at once, discipline should, little by little, be directed, and ordained, and carried on to perfection, by that vicar of the Lord, the Holy Spirit.”²⁹⁶ Tertullian defends this doctrine of the development of discipline by means of the Holy Spirit by appealing to John 16:12. “I have many things to say to you, but ye are not yet able to bear them: when the Spirit of truth shall have come, He will conduct you into all truth, and will report to you the supervening (things).”²⁹⁷ He thus sees this idea as emerging from the Scripture, not imposed upon it externally.

It should also be noted that Tertullian’s development of discipline is to be understood as a discipline that seeks to restore what was lost, and is thus related to his doctrine of the fall: “In Christian living we seek to reform the pattern of behaviour according to the primeval truth. This is the aim of the *praescriptum disciplinae*.”²⁹⁸ This is further demonstration of Tertullian’s historical circle, that progress is a restoration of what was lost in ancient times.

²⁹⁵ Sider, “On the Shows,” 364.

²⁹⁶ Tertullian, *De Velandis Virginibus*, 1.6.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 1.7.

²⁹⁸ Sider, “On the Shows,” 364.

d. Discipline and Exemplars

It was noted earlier that apostles and prophets function as exemplars of how believers are to live. In Tertullian's thought, the lives of the prophets and apostles are subject to addendums as discipline increases over time. This arises in Tertullian's discussion of marriage. Mention is made of Abraham's multiple wives, and Tertullian is concerned that Christians should not re-marry after their spouses die. Dunn comments on how this affects Abraham as an exemplar: "Abraham would have provided an example that could be imitated had not new discipline been imposed, which Tertullian found in 1 Cor 7:29."²⁹⁹ The relevant verse for Tertullian reads: "[T]he appointed time has grown short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away (1 Cor 7:29)."

Tertullian's practice of viewing the prophets and apostles as exemplars whose exemplary behaviour is subject to amendment within their era of discipline is a good example of his warrants being held in tension with one another. The prophets are indeed exemplars, but only within the bounds of the revelation given at the time, subject to later modifications by the Holy Spirit. Thus, Abraham's polygamy was sanctioned for the revelation given at that time, but should not be taken as an example to Christians in the age of the Paraclete, where a stricter discipline is imposed upon them. Therefore, the rule of discipline, as dictated by the dispensation of the time, is determinative for Tertullian's exegesis for how Christians are to read the Scriptures in his era.

²⁹⁹ Dunn, "Tertullian, Paul, and the Nation of Israel," in *Tertullian and Paul*, 94.

5. The Rule of Context

The progress of revelation, and the development of discipline within that revelation leads us to the next principle of exegesis, that is, the consideration of context. Tertullian regularly excoriates his opponents for wresting the Scriptures from their context. It is important to observe that Tertullian's notion of context was subject to the above-mentioned ages of discipline. To Tertullian, it is anathema to fail to discern the current historical age, and how that differs from previous ages. Properly discerning the ages is crucial to how we read and apply the Scriptures. Kaufman notes: "[P]ropositions, and prescriptions could be appreciated in light of their authors' intentions, and since God was the ultimate author of those intentions and orchestrated them progressively, that appreciation shed clues to the historical rationality of revelation and was indispensable if revelation were to be usefully re-appropriated."³⁰⁰

Tertullian's talk about the importance of placing texts within their context is thus buttressed by a larger context of the revelation of God across history. The Scriptures form a single, unified revelation which gives Tertullian the freedom to minimize the importance of textual context in some cases. For instance, he says that despite their regional titles, Paul's letters are written to all churches: "But of what consequence are the titles, since in writing to a certain church the apostle did in fact write to all?"³⁰¹ Any nuance that might arise from commands given to a particular congregation, like Ephesus or Corinth, are collapsed, for Paul's epistles are in fact written to all churches. For Tertullian, this is a firm assertion of the divine authorship of the Scriptures, and divine authorship implies divine intentions behind localized texts that go beyond the immediate concerns of the localized text. On this basis, the instructions of the Scriptures can then be immediately applied to Tertullian's readers.

³⁰⁰ Kaufman, "Tertullian on Heresy, History, and the Reappropriation of Revelation," 177.

³⁰¹ Tertullian, *Adv. Marcion*, 5.17.1.

Tertullian acknowledged that there are certain commands that transcend all considerations of context. He enumerates several factors which ordinarily contribute to variables: time, person, and region. “I will show in Latin also that it behooves our virgins to be veiled from the time that they have passed the turning point of their age: that this observance is exacted by truth, on which no one can impose prescription-no space of times, no influence of persons, no privilege of regions.”³⁰² These three variables are the conditions that contribute to whether commands were normative for all time, or merely circumstantial. Thus, there are commands and circumstances that warrant more subtle interpretations of the Scriptures. On the whole, subtle scriptural ambiguities do not feature strongly in Tertullian. He would not be Tertullian if he refrained from his customary rhetorical flair in summing up his sentiments towards those who relativize what he considered to be absolute: “But our Lord Christ has surnamed himself Truth, not Custom.”³⁰³

6. The Rule of Ecclesiastical Fellowship

Tertullian held a very high view of the importance of the ecclesiastical fellowship. That is, he held that the church, her bishops, her members, and the saints all walking in disciplined Christian living, all contributed to the right interpretation of Scripture. In Tertullian we find reference to “the church as our mother” which he held in contradistinction to a society run by the Julian laws.³⁰⁴ This robust view of the church stood in contrast to views of the church that only regarded her immediate hierarchy of governance to be significant: “the church is not a conclave of bishops, but the

³⁰² Tertullian, *De Velandis Virginibus*, 1.1.

³⁰³ Ibid., 1.2.

³⁰⁴ Tertullian, *De Monogamia*, 16.5.

manifestation of the Holy Spirit.”³⁰⁵ Tertullian nevertheless gives early testimony to the importance of ecclesiastical hierarchy, and waxes poetic about the significance of the church of Rome;

Since, moreover, you are close upon Italy, you have Rome, from which there comes even into our own hands the very authority (of apostles themselves). How happy, is its church, on which apostles poured forth all their doctrine along with their blood! Where Peter endures a passion like his Lord’s! Where Paul wins his crown in a death like John’s where the Apostle John was first plunged, unhurt, into boiling oil, and thence remitted to his island-exile!³⁰⁶

The church of Rome drew her significance from the apostles. The importance of certain congregations was related to apostolic authority. Tertullian explicitly draws the connection between the apostles, their writings, and the churches they founded. “[R]un over the apostolic churches, in which the very thrones of the apostles are still preeminent in their places, in which their own authentic writings are read...”³⁰⁷ However, this authority was not by mere right of apostolic succession, but by their successor’s adherence to apostolic teaching.

This reverence for fidelity to the apostolic writings is seen even in Tertullian’s references to the “Pontifex Maximus,” the bishop of bishops in Rome, whom he excoriates for making immoral edicts that feed the “sensual appetites.”³⁰⁸ Though Tertullian at times emphasizes apostolic succession and ecclesiastical hierarchy, especially the bishop of Rome, this is not a slavish historical continuity. Rather, the historical connection of churches with apostles must also conform to apostolic doctrine and Christian conduct, from which successors may depart. “Tertullian insisted that the church was identified by its historical connection with the apostles and adherence to apostolic doctrine.”³⁰⁹

Speaking of the apostles and the logic of succession, Tertullian writes:

³⁰⁵ Tertullian, *De Pudicitia*, 21.17.

³⁰⁶ Tertullian, *De Prescriptio*, 36.2-3.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 36.1.

³⁰⁸ Tertullian, *De Pudicitia*, 1.7.

³⁰⁹ Ferguson, “Tertullian,” 317.

[A]fter first bearing witness to the faith in Jesus Christ throughout Judea, and founding churches there, they next went forth into the world and preached the same doctrine of the same faith to the nations. They then in like manner founded churches in every city, from which all the other churches, one after another, derived the tradition of the faith, and the seeds of doctrine, *and are every day deriving them*, that they may become churches.³¹⁰

This applies also to anyone holding clerical office. In a lengthy discussion of the relationship of the keys of the kingdom, the church, and ecclesial authority, Tertullian elaborates as follows:

For in accordance with the person of Peter, it is to spiritual men that this power will correspondently pertain, either to an apostle or else to a prophet...“the Church” it is true, will forgive sins: but it will be the Church of the Spirit, by means of a spiritual man; not the Church which consists of a number of bishops. For the right and arbitrariness is the Lord’s, not the servant’s; God’s himself, not the priest’s.³¹¹

There must be a daily conforming to the tradition of the faith in order for churches to truly be churches in Tertullian’s thought. He is lacking a doctrine of ecclesiastical authority that grants unconditional hereditary powers to the church. Rather, it is the church that must conform to the genuine source of authority, the apostles. According to Eno: “Tertullian does not yet have any mechanism or structure in the earthly Church which is itself a God-given authority enabled to judge between truth and falsehood in doctrine. Offices and structures like the Roman primacy or the council are barely seen in Tertullian.”³¹² In clarifying the importance of ecclesiastical structures for Tertullian’s hermeneutics, it is important to note that correct interpretations are not the result of conciliar deliberation, nor simple claims to apostolic authority to interpret the Scriptures.

Apostolic authority itself is not strictly about dogma, but is also subject to ethical criteria: “In this way all are primitive, and all are apostolic, whilst they are all proved to be one, in (unbroken) unity, by their peaceful communion, and title of brotherhood, and bond of hospitality, -privileges which

³¹⁰ Tertullian, *De Prescriptio*, 20.4-5. Emphasis mine.

³¹¹ Tertullian, *De Pudicitia*, 21.16-17.

³¹² Eno, “Ecclesia Docens: Structures of Doctrinal Authority in Tertullian and Vincent,” 105.

no other rule directs than the one tradition of the selfsame mystery.”³¹³ For Tertullian, Christian living is a proof that a church is conformed to apostolic doctrine.

Lastly as pertains to the rule of ecclesiastical fellowship, Tertullian writes of his warm reverence for church councils: “Besides, throughout the provinces of Greece there are held in definite localities those councils gathered out of the universal churches, by whose means not only all the deeper questions are handled for the common benefit, but the actual representation of the whole Christian name is celebrated with great veneration.”³¹⁴

This passage is significant not just as evidence that Tertullian was not a withdrawn spiritual fideist as some claim,³¹⁵ but even in the above cited work, which is a defence of Montanist practices on fasting, Tertullian speaks of the beauty and importance of ecclesiastical councils. There still is no explanation of the mechanism of authority of these councils, nonetheless he held them in high esteem.

In Tertullian’s thought, there is an ongoing process of discernment that the church practices in coming to a right interpretation of the Scriptures. It is not by the decrees of popes, nor councils, but it is nonetheless ecclesiastical and communal in nature. This process is spelled out in the first three chapters of *De Velandis Virginibus*. Therein, Tertullian first states that the rule of faith is the immovable starting point of doctrinal discussion: “This law of faith being constant, the other succeeding points of discipline and conversation admit the “novelty” of correction; the grace of God, to wit, operating and advancing even to the end.”³¹⁶ The Holy Spirit then takes this foundation, and builds on it “little by little”, because “human mediocrity was unable to take in all things at once.” Within this purview of the Spirit’s tasks is “the direction of discipline, the revelation of the scriptures, the reformation of the

³¹³ Tertullian, *De Prescriptio*, 20.8-9.

³¹⁴ Tertullian, *De Jejuniis*, 13.6.

³¹⁵ Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*, 10-11.

³¹⁶ Tertullian, *De Velandis Virginibus*, 1.5.

intellect, the advancement towards better things. Nothing is without stages of growth: all things await their season.”³¹⁷

Tertullian then brings his ecclesiology, proposing that the practices of those churches founded by apostles be taken as models for proper custom. The authority of custom of earlier churches should be preferred to customs of churches founded later. After these considerations, “[A]s generally happens in all cases of various practice, of doubt, and of uncertainty, examination ought to have been made to see which of two so diverse customs were the more compatible with the discipline of God.”³¹⁸

Tertullian then begins advancing his arguments for why the specific issue of veiled virgins is more compatible with the discipline of God.

The above demonstrates Tertullian’s conception of the work of the Holy Spirit in interpreting the Scriptures through the church, through a method of establishing which customs are the will of God by granting liberty to either practice until “[T]he power of discerning began to advance, so that the licence granted to either fashion was becoming the mean whereby the indication of the better part emerged.”³¹⁹ These chapters are a fascinating discourse that spell out the means by which the Holy Spirit works out the proper interpretation of the Scriptures. Through the means of granting liberty of practice within the church until the wiser course of action becomes apparent, Christians discern the will of God.

Scriptural interpretation then, in Tertullian, is the work of the Holy Spirit. This is not merely a grammatical and logical process, nor a matter of conciliar deliberation, nor an authoritative claim to apostolic heritage. Exegesis is practicing the faith, the Spirit using the means of liberty in the church to bring out by lived experience the true discipline which God wants lived among his people. For all of

³¹⁷ Ibid., 1.6; 1.8.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 2.4.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 3.2.

Tertullian's rigour, the current age of the Paraclete is not an age of static commands that will not develop or progress. Rather, the age of the Paraclete is an age of refinement of discipline, where customs are tested in the fire of practical experience. In this dialectic of various Christian practices, diversity of Christian living is tolerated until it is discerned which way is best.

7. The Rule of Tradition

Tertullian makes a few comments in his writings about the authority of custom and tradition. For Tertullian, custom and tradition are related terms, one flowing naturally out of the other: "If no passage of scripture has prescribed it, assuredly custom, which without doubt flowed from tradition, has confirmed it."³²⁰ Here custom is used to describe the practice of not wearing a victory laurel.

In the controversy over whether or not there was an esoteric extra-scriptural tradition to which his opponents appealed, Tertullian vehemently rejected any notion of tradition that did not arise from apostolic teaching, especially as demonstrated by communion with churches founded by apostles. "Like Irenaeus, Tertullian defines tradition as that which derives from the teaching of the apostles."³²¹ Tertullian wrote: "It remains, then, that we demonstrate whether this doctrine of ours, of which we have now given the rule, has its origin in the tradition of the apostles, and whether all other doctrines do not *ipso facto* proceed from falsehood. We hold communion with the apostolic churches because our doctrine is in no respect different from theirs. This is our witness of truth."³²²

This must be born in mind when reading Tertullian's later statements on custom in his book *De Velandis Virginibus*, wherein he argues that it has become clear, in the course of allowing liberty to wearing the veil or not, that wearing the veil is the will of God. Tertullian does not have in mind a

³²⁰ Tertullian, *De Corona*, 3.2.

³²¹ Daniélou, *A History of Early Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicea*, 182.

³²² Tertullian, *De Prescriptio*, 21.6-7.

process of discerning new teaching that is outside of practices already present in apostolic churches and the Scriptures. The esoteric tradition of Tertullian's enemies is to be distinguished from common, or Scriptural tradition.

However, it should not be ignored that Tertullian holds to a number of traditions that he admits go beyond the explicit text of Scripture. He mentions that the practice of baptism is followed by having those baptized partake of milk and honey, and then refraining from bathing for a week. He also mentions the baptized making a pledge before being thrice immersed: "[M]aking a somewhat ampler pledge than the Lord has appointed in the Gospel."³²³ Tertullian thus puts his own extra-scriptural practices in plain view, and remarks on them as follows: "If, for these and other such rules, you insist on having positive Scripture injunction, you will find none. Tradition will be held forth as the originator of them, custom as their strengthener, and faith as their observer."³²⁴

Tertullian's readers may thus find him arguing for an apparently convenient view of tradition. Tradition, and the customs that follow from tradition are admitted to the table, but only such traditions that meet the following criteria: they must be traditions established in churches that hold apostolic communion, as evidenced by their adherence to the rule of faith, as well as their historical lineage to the apostles. Tertullian's arguments for tradition, which include many appeals to reason and Scripture, are admitted to have no explicit scriptural witness. They are confirmed by their appearance in apostolic churches, and by reason. "[I]f reason too is God's gift, you may then learn, not whether custom has to be followed by you, but why."³²⁵

Traditions are also amenable by direct revelation of the Holy Spirit. Though not an entirely clear passage, Tertullian seems to argue that a revelation of the Paraclete may confirm or correct

³²³ Tertullian, *De Corona*, 3.3.

³²⁴ Tertullian, *De Corona*, 4.1.

³²⁵ Tertullian, *De Corona*, 4.7.

traditions. In a lengthy argument about the correct hour for stations of prayer and fasting, Tertullian makes brief reference to the role the Holy Spirit may play in confirming or correcting traditions: “[O]f those things which are observed on the ground of tradition, we are bound to adduce so much the more worthy of reason, that they lack the authority of Scripture, until by some signal celestial gift they be either confirmed or else corrected.”³²⁶

8. The Rule of Grammar and Logic

In the above analysis we have covered Tertullian’s more explicit theological principles that influence his handling of the Scriptures. Beyond this, this thesis would like to draw attention to a few simple literary characteristics of Tertullian’s hermeneutics. That is, his appeal to rules of grammar and logic that distinguish his approach from allegorical readings that were prevalent among some of his contemporaries.

For simplicity, in seeking to paint a broad picture of how Tertullian uses the Scriptures, these hermeneutical tools of Tertullian will be categorized under the heading “grammar and logic.” This section is making no attempt to capture comprehensively all of the literary, grammatical and logical tools Tertullian brings to the fore. A few of the more salient examples will suffice to demonstrate some of these more mundane aspects of Tertullian’s hermeneutics.

Tertullian regularly appeals to internal consistency. He insists that if an interpretation renders the Scriptures internally inconsistent, it must be false. “[I]n as much as it is easier to believe that that one passage should have some explanation agreeable with the others, then that an apostle should seem to have taught principles mutually diverse.”³²⁷ This is both a testament to Tertullian’s conviction of the

³²⁶ Tertullian, *De Jeuniis*, 10.5.

³²⁷ Tertullian, *On Monogamy*, 11.8.

unity and divine authorship or the Scriptures as his conviction that two mutually exclusive things cannot both be true at the same time, and is a testament to how strongly Tertullian internalized the law of non-contradiction.

Heresy is characterized by certain exegetical practices, says Tertullian, most notably exalting obscure passages over plentiful and clear ones: “But this is the usual way with perverse and ignorant heretics; yes, and by this time even with psychics universally: to arm themselves with the opportune support of some one ambiguous passage, in opposition to the disciplined host of sentences of the entire document”³²⁸

One principle to which Tertullian frequently appeals is repetition. That is, he scorns his opponents for taking their stand on a single verse or two, and exhorts his readers to subject single obscure texts to the certitude that comes from multiple texts buttressing an idea. “Yield up, by this time, to so many and such sentences, the one passage to which you claim. Paucity is cast into the shade by multitude, doubt by certainty, obscurity by plainness.”³²⁹

Tertullian is an advocate of plain language. He expresses contempt for allegorical trends regarding cardinal Christian doctrines: “For some, when they have alighted on a very usual form of prophetic statement, generally expressed in figure and allegory, though not always, distort into some imaginary sense even the most clearly described doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, alleging that even death itself must be understood in a spiritual sense.”³³⁰ For Tertullian, allegorical readings rob texts of meaning rather than enlighten them. He insists texts be read in a plain sense: “If these announcements are not understood as they are made, without doubt they signify something else than

³²⁸ Tertullian, *De Pudicitia*, 14.24.

³²⁹ Tertullian, *De Pudicitia*, 17.18.

³³⁰ Tertullian, *De Resurrectione Carnis*, 19.2.

the sound indicates; and there will be one thing in the words, another in their meanings, as is the case with allegories, with parables, with riddles.”³³¹

This strong sense of the literal meaning in Tertullian extends to passages that are best taken as symbolic, or visionary. For example, Tertullian understands Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones to be an actual historical event.³³² “To be a sign, the vision must itself have consistency and reality. If the bones are the image of the reunion of Israel, then they must actually have risen. The historical reality of the event is important for Tertullian.”³³³ This is not to say that Tertullian is unable to see anything beyond the literal. He does acknowledge figurative language in the Scriptures, and is comfortable using allegory on rare occasions, such as the following Christological interpretation of Psalm 45: “If he is not a warrior, and the sword he brandishes is an allegorical one, then the Creator’s Christ in the psalm too may have been girded with the figurative sword of the Word, without any martial gear...Acknowledge, then, that His spoils are figurative, since you have learned that His arms are allegorical.”³³⁴

Tertullian is willing to consider allegory when the literal makes no sense to him. His own argument is articulated by an appeal to what is natural: “Certainly, if nature nowhere allows this, - (namely,) to serve as a soldier before developing into manhood, to take ‘the power of Damascus’ before knowing your father, -it follows that the pronouncement is visibly figurative.”³³⁵ O’ Malley puts it this way: “His principle, that allegory obtains when the literal sense results in nonsense.”³³⁶ For Tertullian, figurative language must be based on actual experience and reality, and must contain some reference to things that actually are.

³³¹ Tertullian, *Scorpiae*, 11.4.

³³² Tertullian, *De Resurrectione Carnis*, 30.5.

³³³ O’Malley, *Tertullian and the Bible*, 156

³³⁴ Tertullian, *Adv. Marcionem*, 3.14.5-7.

³³⁵ Tertullian, *Adv. Judaeos*, 9.6.

³³⁶ O’Malley, *Tertullian and the Bible*, 158.

Now if any person should go so far as to suppose that all these passages ought to be spiritually interpreted, he will yet be unable to deprive them of the true accomplishment of those issues which must come to pass just as they have been written. For all figures of speech necessarily arise out of real things, not out of chimerical ones; because nothing is capable of imparting anything of its own for a similitude, except it actually be that very thing which it imparts in the similitude. I return therefore to the principles which defines that all things which have come from nothing shall return at last to nothing.³³⁷

Nevertheless, in practice, there is a subjectivity to his willingness to allegorize some passages, but not others. Whereas he states the principles of when Scripture is allegorical is based on nature, this seems to extend to whenever Tertullian feels the human authors of the Scriptures are making a point that he considers to be bizarre. In Tertullian's most allegorical moment, he does this with a passage from 1 Corinthians 15.

'There is one flesh of man' (that is, servants of God, but really human), 'another flesh of beasts' (that is, the heathen, of whom the prophet actually says, 'Man is like the senseless cattle'), 'another flesh of birds' (that is, the martyrs which essay to mount up to heaven), 'another of fishes' (that is, those whom the water of baptism has submerged)...Now, if this language is not to be construed figuratively, it was absurd enough for him to make a contrast between the flesh of mules and kites...'³³⁸

It should be emphasized that allegory in Tertullian is exceptional, occurring only a small handful of times, and often with his target audience in view. O' Malley notes: "Tertullian employs it with most confidence in his polemic with Marcion, and in that controversy he justifies its use from the text of Marcion-Paul, to show the unity of the two testaments."³³⁹ It is also more rare in works of Tertullian considered to be controversial. Tertullian is much more free and open in his exegesis when dealing with literature where internal issues between Christians are at play such as *on Baptism*, *on Penance*, and *on Patience*. His works that are devoted to more explicit pagan-Christian controversies are far more cautious in handling the Scriptures. Allegory is by no means Tertullian's primary instinct, and occurs

³³⁷ Tertullian, *Adv. Hermogenes*, 34.3-4.

³³⁸ Tertullian, *De Resurrectione Carnis* 52.12-14.

³³⁹ O' Malley, *Tertullian and the Bible*, 158.

rarely and strangely enough that it could be considered a kind of lapse from the overall tenor of his work. It is probably best seen as a device used in opposition to allegorically-minded interlocutors as a means of defeating them on their own exegetical turf.

Conclusion

Tertullian never wrote an extended treatise on his hermeneutics. Nevertheless, he gives us glimpses of his hermeneutical principles, often simply and briefly stated, at other times implied. Within these glimpses, it is possible to discern a general hierarchy of thought, though current scholarship has not come to a consensus on how to summarize this, and many scholars despair of the project altogether. This thesis is more hopeful of such a project, and has attempted to put together a picture of Tertullian's hermeneutics that accurately represents his thinking *vis a vis* scriptural interpretation.

If there is a systematic hierarchy, at the apex of this pyramid we find the rule of reason and nature, that revelation from God accessible to all men, yet corrupted by sin. It is the Scriptures and the rule of faith that serve to correct these distortions, and according to Tertullian, these are received from Jesus. The Scriptures and rule of faith are carefully supported by an actual lived-out Christian faith within apostolic churches. These churches form a crucial bridge between Christ, the apostles, and the present. This Christian faith is identified above all by discipline, the practice of which distinguishes those who can properly understand the Scriptures and those who can not. Below this, we find supporting arguments from tradition and custom, which are in turn buttressed by arguments from nature and reason and may be supplemented or corrected by direct revelation from the Holy Spirit. All of this is seen to operate within the flow of history, as God directs man back to the paradise from which he fell, restoring the ancient communion which was lost due to sin. God is given the liberty to impose upon his creatures varying economies of discipline, of which the current age of the Paraclete is leading

the church into a perfect maturity. There is an inner circularity to Tertullian's historical thought. His reasoning is not a syllogism that begins with a foundational principle and extrapolates the rest from that foundation. History began well, and the closer a source is to that beginning, the more authoritative it is. At the same time, history is returning to that original paradise, and so the most recent developments are an improvement over the corruptions of the past.

Tertullian's foundational principles, and their hermeneutic implications exist in Tertullian's thought as intersecting warrants held in tension with one another. Tertullian should probably not be seen as advocating a strict hierarchy of principles with mutually exclusive definitions. Many of these principles have significant conceptual overlap, and are best seen as a network of principles, some with more gravitas than others according to Tertullian's rhetorical needs of the moment.

Where some scholars see a morass of rhetorical opportunism, this thesis has attempted to make a case that Tertullian has a basic theological and hermeneutical system in mind, even if it has apparent contradictions. Much of what determines his exegesis is an eclectic symposium of ideas that, though fluctuating in and out of view for his rhetorical needs, are held together with remarkable consistency throughout his varied treatises. This compilation of principles forms a unique system of hermeneutics that justifies Tertullian's use of, and interpretations of the Scriptures. His core ideas may not garner much sympathy from modern readers. He may not have done the best job of judiciously applying his hermeneutics to all verses and topics equally. However, this should not obfuscate the fact that Tertullian did attempt to articulate his hermeneutics and apply them to various contemporary doctrinal and ethical concerns. For a writer who has been accused of going mad in his later years, there does appear to be a method to his madness.

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